

The Church and Applied Soteriology

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Reformed theology in its best expression has long been sensitive to the covenantal contours of God's redemption of his people. Within the rubric of redemption, issues of Christology and soteriology, questions of who is the redeemer and how redemption is accomplished and applied, have stood at the heart of the church's theology. But there is reason to believe that the church's stand on those sensitive issues has not been uniform, and the positions taken have shown at times serious raggedness around the edges, if not suspicious deformity at the core. Our objective in this paper is to raise some possible grounds for renewed consideration on those levels.

The Savoy Declaration that we have under review at this conference begins its chapter "Of the Church" with an address to the church in its invisible aspect. "The Catholic or universal church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof."¹ "The whole number of the elect" are those whom God the Father, in the determinate council of the Godhead before the foundation of the world, gave to the Son to redeem. Christ the Redeemer brought them to the Father in his high priestly prayer: "I have manifested thy name unto the men *which thou gavest me* out of the world . . . thine they were and *thou gavest them me*" (John 17:6, italics added). The covenant of redemption determined the course of salvation's history. We do not at this time endeavor to plumb further the divine counsel and the redemptive offices of the respective Persons of the Godhead. We are interested, rather, in the application of the redemption that was thereby conceived and accomplished, and, at least in an introductory sense, in certain competing claims as to the status of those who were redeemed. That will make necessary some comments on both the natural status of the redeemed as they exist in this world apart from the knowledge of Christ, and the glories of the new position they inhabit by reason of their union with Christ. In short, that remarkable change in status is referred to pointedly in Colossians 1:13: "[God] hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son." The same conclusion lies liberally and clearly on the pages of Scripture.

Our interest at present lies principally not only in the terms of that translation as such, but in the application of the implied redemption to the sinners whom Christ came to save. We have referred to the relevant level of discourse as "applied soteriology," soteriology having to do, that is, with the structure of the presence and provision of salvation. We are indebted for the expression "applied soteriology" at this time to Richard Gaffin, Jr., who sums up in those terms his purportedly path-breaking work in this area. Gaffin's conclusion, which follows from what is essentially an attempt at paradigm reconstruction, is that "Not justification by faith but union with the resurrected Christ by faith (of which union, to be sure, the justifying aspect stands out perhaps most

¹ *The Savoy Declaration of Faith*, with introduction by Robert E. Davis, (Millers Falls, MA: First Congregational Church, 1998), 65.

prominently) is the central motif of Paul's applied soteriology."² What, it is being asked, is the central motif of applied soteriology? Here it is being said that it is not the historic focus of Reformed theology on the question of justification by faith in Christ, as he performed his voluntary dying on the cross as the substitute for sinners in bearing the guilt of their sin, but the principal motif lies in certain reasons for, and the benefits of, the Christian believer's union with Christ by faith. We shall expand on these questions under the heading of applied soteriology, where the issues will be raised of what is to be understood as the object of saving faith, the expression of the endowed gift of the ability to exercise faith, and the reception by God the Father of the repentant sinner.

Union with Christ theology

Gaffin's focus of thought on the resurrection of Christ, following principally the influence of Geerhardus Vos,³ informs all he has to say on the question of redemption. Everything turns for his theological thesis on the believer's union with Christ. An expressive explanation of his argument depends on what he refers to as "The resurrection of Christ and the past resurrection of the believer,"⁴ and the meaning and implications of the believer's union with Christ that that carries along with it is drawn out in its various aspects. Gaffin's absorption with the resurrection of Christ, which, as has just been noted, carries along with it the resurrection of believers, leads in his system of thought to a number of important conclusions. First, the resurrection of Christ is to be understood as his own redemption, by reason of his release from the "power and curse of death which was in force until the moment of being raised."⁵ "To Paul's way of thinking," it is said, "as long as Christ remains dead, Satan and sin are triumphant."⁶ We shall return to the point.

Similarly, Christ's resurrection is to be understood as his *adoption*,⁷ his *justification*,⁸ his *sanctification*,⁹ and his *glorification*.¹⁰ Then on the grounds that the believer is "raised with Christ,"¹¹ the conclusion follows that the adoption, justification, sanctification, and glorification of the believer are what they because he shares in the adoption, justification, sanctification (taking this "not as a process but as a definitive act"¹²) and glorification that Christ accomplished for himself. "The notion that the believer has been raised with Christ brings into view all that now characterizes him as a result of having been joined to Christ *as resurrected*."¹³ Gaffin continues: "It means that

² Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *Resurrection and Redemption: A study in Paul's Soteriology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1987), 132.

³ See Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961); Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948); Richard B. Gaffin, ed., *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1980).

⁴ Op. cit., 41.

⁵ Op. cit., 116.

⁶ Idem.

⁷ Op. cit., 117.

⁸ Op. cit., 119.

⁹ Op. cit., 124.

¹⁰ Op. cit., 126.

¹¹ Op. cit., 127.

¹² Op. cit., 124.

¹³ Op. cit., 129.

he has been justified, adopted, sanctified, and glorified with Christ . . . that he has been united with the Christ, who is justified, adopted, sanctified, and glorified, and so by virtue of this (existential) union shares those benefits.”¹⁴

In the context of debate regarding the Christian’s union with Christ, the words of John Calvin have been called in support of certain related positions: “As long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us.”¹⁵ There can be no doubt that the doctrine of the believer’s union with Christ is prominent in Calvin’s theology. Perhaps the union with Christ theology, as we have already drawn attention to some of its main outlines, rests heavily on Calvin’s following statement: “Therefore, to share with us *what he has received from the Father*, he had to become ours and to dwell within us.”¹⁶ There, no doubt, is Gaffin’s “sharing” with Christ what he accomplished for himself, redemption, adoption, justification, sanctification, and glorification. But expressively, Calvin goes on to say that “It is true that we obtain this by faith,”¹⁷ and he then devotes considerable space to explaining that faith is received by “the secret energy of the Spirit,”¹⁸ and that “the Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself.”¹⁹ “We must be *drawn by the Spirit* to be aroused to *seek Christ*.”²⁰ The faith that Calvin discusses at length at that point, as to its meaning and origin, is “the principal work of the Holy Spirit.” All that, it can be said, the “drawing to seek Christ,” is what the statement of the gospel has traditionally involved. Only as the prior statement of the gospel that alerts the individual to “seek Christ” is placed securely within the context of the meaning of sin and the call to belief and trust in his substitutionary death for sinners, only then will the meaning, the object, and the results of saving faith be clearly proclaimed and constitute the call to sinners and the good news it provides.

But a summary statement and warning are in order. It is not the case that the Christian believer is joined in union with Christ because he has come to faith in him and in his redeeming work. The opposite is true. We shall see when we come to consider the fact and doctrine of regeneration that it is because at that point the sinner is joined to Christ, and is the recipient of the unique benefit of that act of the Spirit, that one comes to faith in Christ. What is at issue at that point is akin to the central fallacy of the Arminian scheme of things. For that system of thought argues improperly that one does not come to Christ because he has been made regenerate, and has thereby become partaker of all the benefits that accrue to that. Rather, the Arminians insist that one is made regenerate because he comes to Christ in belief. Billy Graham’s book, *How to be Born Again*, is a case in point.²¹

Or to take another example of what is involved, consider the statement regarding the resurrection of the believer as the apostle John sees it in his first epistle. It is stated there that “We know that when he [Christ] shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall

¹⁴ Op. cit., 129.

¹⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, edited by John T. McNeill. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles, 1959), 537.

¹⁶ Idem, italics added.

¹⁷ Idem.

¹⁸ Idem.

¹⁹ Op. cit., 538.

²⁰ Op. cit., 544, italics added.

²¹ Billy Graham, *How to be Born Again* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1989).

see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). It is not the case that in that grand event we will become like Christ because “we shall see him as he is.” Again, the opposite is true. It is because, in the ministry of the Holy Spirit to us in this life we have been made like Christ, we shall see him as he is. We shall see him as the glorified redeemer. The ungodly will see him, not as he is in that glorious respect, but as the judge to whom the determination of eternal perdition has been committed.

As to the *ordo salutis* as Reformed theology has traditionally seen it, we anticipate what follows by noting Gaffin’s conclusion that “Paul does not view the justification of the sinner (the imputation of Christ’s righteousness) as an act having a discrete structure of its own. Rather, as with Christ’s resurrection, the act of being raised with Christ . . . is at the same time judicially declarative . . . the act of being joined to Christ is conceived of imputatively.”²²

All that means that Gaffin has set aside what Reformed theology has hitherto understood as the *ordo salutis*, or the order of the application of redemption, as John Murray, for example, has carefully expounded that.²³ To take as an immediate example to which we shall return, we reflect on *regeneration* as an element of that *ordo salutis*. Gaffin’s preoccupation with the believer’s union with Christ leads, in his system of thought, to a number of significant conclusions on that point. “Unlike the traditional *ordo salutis* Paul explicates the inception of the application of redemption without recourse to the terminology of regeneration or new birth understood as ‘a communication of a new principle of life.’”²⁴ “The use of ‘regeneration’ in Titus 3:5 is to be explained as a subordinate element in Paul’s resurrection theology. . . . It describes an aspect of what the believer has already experienced, it is an aspect of the experience of being raised with Christ . . . of being joined to the resurrected Christ.”²⁵ “[The] doctrine of regeneration works as something foreign and extraneous in comparison with Paul’s *ordo*.”²⁶ Because of Gaffin’s concentrations on what he understands as the benefits accruing from Christ’s resurrection, his focus of thought falls on the fact that, as he states it, “in Paul’s soteriology there is a correlation between Christ as life-giving and the sinner as life-receiving . . . which carries back to the very point of inception of salvation, a correlation which characterizes the single act of being joined to Christ.”²⁷ And “This correlation” raises the question whether “the notion of a distinct enlivening act (causally or temporally) prior to the initial act of faith serves this end or is not itself a distortion of Paul’s viewpoint.”²⁸ Gaffin concludes his argument by recognizing that there remains a need “to reach a final judgment on the compatibility of the Reformed doctrine of regeneration with Paul’s soteriology.”²⁹

As to the rejection of the classic *ordo salutis* understanding of the application of redemption, David Garner agrees with Gaffin, and taking note of what he sees as “the

²² Op. cit., 132.

²³ John Murray, *Redemption – accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955).

²⁴ Op. cit., 140.

²⁵ Op. cit., 141.

²⁶ Idem.

²⁷ Op. cit., 142.

²⁸ Idem.

²⁹ Idem.

enduringly pressing errors in the *ordo salutis*,³⁰ he places emphasis on what he understands as the punctiliar nature of the *ordo*. That point of view should be carefully noted. Garner continues that “Salvation entails a vital and solidaric union with the resurrected Son of God, whom every believer receives once for all by faith. Believers do not receive justification *or* sanctification in sequence – logically or chronologically – any more than they receive Jesus himself incrementally; they receive all redemptive graces simultaneously, because at the moment of Spirit-wrought faith union, they receive the Son of God resurrected. Contrary to Hodge and others who insist on a series of *ordo salutis* acts in the life of a believer, the application of redemption is punctiliar with durative force. Union with Christ, the resurrected Son of God, delivers Christ directly to those tethered to him by Spirit-wrought faith.”³¹

Here, in a manner that is left undefined or adequately explained, all redemptive benefits accruing to the believer are said to be what they are by virtue of the act of faith in the resurrected and adopted Son of God. Christ is assumed to become, at the point of his resurrection, the adopted Son of God. He was then adopted as the “Son of God in power” (Rom 1:4) He was at that time raised to a new level or stage of Sonship.³² The Christian believer is then, in the manner Garner claims, adopted in Christ who was himself, at his resurrection, adopted to that higher stage of Sonship. The essence of Garner’s argument is that “What proves true for Christ is then counted to those who become the children of God by Spirit-wrought faith.”³³ Or the Gaffin-Garner doctrinal concept of a punctiliar *ordo salutis* is observed again in the conclusion that “Contrary to common *ordo salutis* distortions that turn union with Christ into a series of events, the bounty of redemptive grace comes punctiliarly when, in the moment of saving faith, the redeemed receive the Son of God by the ministry of the Spirit of adoption.”³⁴ But we have already seen that the repentant sinner is not joined to Christ on the basis of, and because of, saving faith. Rather, one comes to saving faith because at the point of the Holy Spirit’s conveyance to him of the grace of regeneration he is joined to Christ and is translated from the kingdom of darkness into the family of God’s dear Son (Col 1:13).

Applied soteriology

What has been said to this point comes to sharper focus in our conclusions with reference to the sinner’s regeneration and the relevance of that to our principal argument. We address that important matter in the context of applied soteriology. The notion of “applied” in that context conjures an investigation of who it was whose actions in this world accomplished the redemption in view, and what was involved in actual real time in the application of that redemption. The only redeemer of God’s elect, we answer with the Westminster Shorter Catechism, is “The Lord Jesus Christ who, being the eternal Son of God became man, and so was, and continues to be God and man, in two distinct natures

³⁰ David B. Garner, *Sons in the Son: The Riches and Reach of Adoption in Christ* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2016), 240.

³¹ Op. cit., 238–39.

³² Op. cit., 183: “At his resurrection [he] *was adopted as Son of God in power*,” Italics in original. At the resurrection “Christ became Son in a new way,” op. cit., 187.

³³ Op. cit, 244.

³⁴ Garner, op. cit., 309. See also Richard Gaffin, *By Faith, Not by Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation*. Second edition (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013).

and one person forever.”³⁵ In what we have already seen as the determinate council of the Godhead, the second Person of the Godhead voluntarily undertook to come into this world to become man, to die for sinners and become the head of the redeemed, the church which the Father gave to the Son to redeem. But in doing so and in becoming truly man in Jesus Christ, he did not become a human person. He was, and he remained, a divine person who took into union with his divine nature a full and rational human nature. That human nature was a created, finite, and temporal nature. It was characterized by the ordinary faculties of soul that were common to man, yet without sin. It was in that human nature that Christ died for sinners. He could not die in his divine nature. It was necessary that he should die in his human nature, and in so doing pay the penalty for the sins of the people whom the Father had assigned to him for that purpose, because sin had entered the world in human nature in the fall of our first parent, Adam.

But remaining the eternal Son of God, Christ did not divest himself of any aspect of the divine nature in which he existed in perichoresis within the Godhead. He did lay aside the signs and insignia of his divine glory. We are required to say that when he was in this world, as to his human nature he was in the world, but as to his divine nature he was both in the world and in heaven with the Father and the Spirit. We have the reference in John 3:13 to the “Son of man which is in heaven.”³⁶ By virtue of his heavenly session, in which he has not divested himself of his human nature, we say correspondingly that now, as to his divine nature he is both in the world and in heaven, while as to his human nature he is in heaven.

Now it is of first importance to bear in mind as we approach the question of applied soteriology, that Christ who suffered for us in his human nature did so with that full human nature in view and in redemptive exercise. If, as we have said, our Lord stood in this world in full human nature, and if, as was also said, it was in that human nature that he suffered and died his vicarious death on the cross, it is clear that the suffering he endured was a suffering of soul, on the one hand, and a suffering of body on the other. Or we bring into view our Lord’s suffering in the *soulish* aspect of his personhood and in the *bodily* aspect of his personhood. We shall see that the relation between those two aspects of what Christ endured on Calvary’s hill come into focus to display the meaning of redemption.

Certainly, as we shall see, Christ laid down his life in human death, in what we shall refer to as his temporal death, and the shedding of his blood at that point has immeasurable significance in the scriptural report and our interpretation of it. For it is clear that “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Heb 9:22, ESV). The shedding of blood was, of course, a critical feature of the Old Testament anticipations of the coming and the work of Christ. But it would be incorrect to say that the blood of Christ was shed simply because it was necessary in order to reflect in the antitype (the sacrifice of Christ) the Old Testament type (the blood of the bulls and goats). The truth is the precise opposite. The blood of the animals was necessary because

³⁵Westminster Shorter Catechism, Various editions, Question 21. See the recent very valuable work by Stephen J. Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2016).

³⁶ It is well known that the phrase “which is in heaven” does not appear in all Greek manuscripts. For a discussion of the relevant issues and a conclusion as to the reliability of the phrase, see William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary, Exposition of the Gospel According to John, Volume II* (Grand Rapids: (Baker Book House, 1954), 500-501.

it had been foreordained from before the foundation of the world that the blood of Christ would be shed in effecting the salvation of his people. The promised Messiah died in *his* human nature for the guilt of the sins of his people in *their* human nature. The biblical references to the blood of Christ, therefore, are properly to be understood as a synecdochical pointing to the sacrifice of Christ in its full compass and meaning.³⁷

Christ's suffering of soul on the cross is to be understood in terms of his cry of dereliction. Two things are to be recognized in relation to it. First, the transaction between the Father and the Son in that crucial hour was such that in his human soul our Savior passed through the pains of hell on our account. The suffering of human soul that was involved was in every respect substitutionary for the pains of eternal perdition that had properly accrued to us. But in that precise hour Christ conquered death for us. He had prayed "with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, *and was heard* in that he feared" (Heb 5:7, italics added). It is to be noted that Christ did not pray to be saved from dying. He came into the world to die, and as he completed his Galilean ministry "he set his face steadfastly to go to Jerusalem" for that very reason and purpose (Luke 9:51). "He was heard," as the text in Hebrews 5 says, and he was saved from death. What is at issue in that profoundly significant statement is that as he passed through the pains of hell and confronted the devil and death, he was not overcome by death. He was, and he remained, in control of that awful process. Death did not overcome him. He overcame death. And while he tasted death for us, he conquered death and emerged from that encounter victorious. Therein lies the foundation and guarantee of our salvation and reconciliation with God.

But secondly, all that has just been said was possible because it was "through the eternal Spirit" that our Lord offered himself (Heb 9:14). Coming to focus, therefore, is the conjunction of the Holy Spirit in that ultimate substitutionary work of Christ. Given that he died in his human nature, the Holy Spirit supported that nature in order that our Lord would sustain his total control over the forces and the onslaught of death and would be victorious. As the Westminster Larger Catechism states it, "It was requisite that the Mediator should be God, that he might sustain and keep the human nature from sinking under the infinite wrath of God."³⁸ There, in its highest and ultimate degree, is the fact that in the works of God external to the Godhead the three Persons of the Godhead are jointly engaged. We see, on careful reflection, the engagement of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the darkest hour of the atonement that was effected in the death of Christ.

That Christ was in control of all of the processes of his offering on the cross, and that he was victorious over the claims of death, has been stated by an old Scottish theologian in sublime words that bear extended statement: "Will He not, in quiet patience, submit and fall a victim unrelenting? . . . No: no. Jesus prevails to suffer all the tortures of man, and all the shafts of Satan, and all the strokes of His Father's sword – and behold! In His hour of chiefest weakness, He is strong to bear them all. His own

³⁷ Andrew A. Bonar, in his valuable *A Commentary on Leviticus* (London: Banner of Truth, 1966), 19–20, has drawn attention to the anticipation of the point made in the preceding paragraph by the requirements of the typical burnt offerings. "The priests shall lay the parts, the head, and the fat, in order . . . upon the altar:" (Lev 1:8). Bonar observes: "The *head* and this *fat* are two pieces – one *outward*, and the other *inward*; thus representing the whole *inner and outer man*. Christ's whole manhood, *body and soul*, was placed on the altar, in the fire, and endured the wrath of God."

³⁸ Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 38.

activity is not overborne, and laid to rest, and in abeyance. He is the livingly active and triumphant Saviour still. Weak man, he sets far aside from Him. Baffled Satan, He banishes back to his place of darkness. His Father's wrath, He bears it all; exhausting in His afflicted soul the vials of all His curse. He passed through the hour and power of darkness unsubdued."³⁹

Thus our Lord passed through eternal death for us. In his victory at that point he was *qualified* then to lay down his life in his temporal death. Hugh Martin again puts the remaining events of the cross before us: "With the cry of triumph on His parched but powerful lips; and His Father's light and love shed abroad again in His faithful heart; and the joy set before Him in the saved souls of men, shining bright to his undimmed eye of faith; and the pleasure of the Lord, as a palm of victory, prospering in His hand; and as a Son, crying, Abba, Father, and committing His spirit [his human soul] to His Father's hands – even thus the conqueror livingly dies; by His own prevailing act, lays down His life for the sheep, a ransom; offers Himself to God, a sacrifice."⁴⁰ In that final act on the cross our Lord, voluntarily and at the moment of his choosing, laid down his life in his temporal death. For as he had made plain in his remarkable discourse on his identity as the good shepherd, "I lay down my life . . . no man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again" (John 10:17–18).

With the context of salvation's history before us or, that is, the *historia salutis*, we adduce again the conclusion made by Gaffin that we observed at the beginning that "as long as Christ remains dead, Satan and sin are triumphant." That statement is crucial to Gaffin's doctrine. Now taking the question of salvation (soteriology) as a whole, the question has properly to be asked at what point, within that total complex, can it be said that in his atonement Christ defeated the "power and curse of sin" and brought to an end what Gaffin refers to as the "triumph of Satan and sin." Was it at our Lord's resurrection? Or was it at the moment when, on the cross, he emerged triumphant from his suffering of eternal death for us, at which point he was victorious over the power and curse of sin? And then the smile of the Father returned to him and he peacefully committed his human soul to the Father. That was because he said in John 19:30, "It is finished." At that point all that was necessary to the redemption of sinners had been accomplished. As our Lord prayed to the Father in his high priestly prayer, "I have finished the work thou gavest me to do."

Before we proceed further, we may call back an earlier question: What, we may now ask, is the object of saving faith, how does that object become meaningful in the mind and thought of the sinner, and how is the sinner's endowed ability to exercise saving faith made operative in the actual exercise of that ability in real historical time?

A grasp of what we have just referred to as real historical time is now to be seen as critically important in the following respects. What, we can ask, is the status of the unregenerate sinner to whom the gospel is preached? He is, in short, "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph 2:1). He is the captive of Satan and sin. He is the blinded dupe of the devil. "Ye are of your father the devil" (John 8:44). "The god of this world has blinded the mind" (2 Cor 4:4). "Professing themselves to be wise they became fools" (Rom 1:22). "The preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness" (1 Cor 1:18). The statement of the case could be extended. Man as unregenerate is a fool and he is

³⁹ Hugh Martin, *The Abiding Presence* (Edinburgh: Knox Press, n.d.), 136.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 137.

spiritually dead. How, then, can he meaningfully receive the gospel, how can he be saved? We shall answer those questions by considering the important question of regeneration for which Gaffin's system of thought, as we have seen, does not have a well-determined place. The necessity of regeneration turns on the fact that the man who is unregenerate has not, in actual historical time, been joined to Christ. He has not been adopted into the family of God. He has not received the gift of the ability to exercise saving faith. He is not the beneficiary of the transference from the "power of darkness" to the "kingdom of [God's] dear Son," as we saw Colossians 1:13 to contemplate.

The question of regeneration

What, then, is to be said of the grace of regeneration as an element or stage of the *ordo salutis*, the order of application of redemption? To grasp what is involved, consider first man as he came from the hands of his Creator, prelapsarian Adam. He was characterized by two aspects of his condition. First, there existed a harmony among the faculties of the soul. With the mind or the intellectual faculty, man naturally knew God. For Adam *to be* was *to know*, and he naturally knew that he had come from the hands of a Creator and that he was covenantally obligated to him. With the heart, or the affective or emotional faculty, man naturally loved God. And with the will, or the volitional faculty, he naturally obeyed God. Second, in that pristine state the mind was the prince of the faculties of the soul. That is clear from the fact that "God walked with Adam in the garden in the cool of the day" (Gen 3:8), and in doing so God communicated to Adam all that he needed to know regarding his relations with his Creator, and all of the laws of obedience and conduct to which Adam and his posterity were committed. It is there that the law was clarified to Adam in its pristine statement.

But at the fall all that was changed. Now the harmony of the faculties was shattered, and the mind was no longer the prince of the faculties. Now that hegemony had been usurped by the lusts and passions of the soul. Now man, in all his faculties and possibilities of action was the enslaved dupe of the devil. As to the things of God and his relation to God, man was now completely dead. Quite simply, fallen man no longer possesses the spiritual faculty necessary to consider the gospel statement.

Let us put that in a different way. What, we can ask, was the essential nature of Adam's sin that caused his fall to the parlous state we have just examined. We have to recognize that the fall occurred not precisely in Adam's eating the forbidden fruit. John Milton, in the opening lines of his immortal *Paradise Lost*, speaks "Of man's first disobedience and the fruit of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste brought death into the world and all our woe."⁴¹ But Adam had committed the fatal sin before he ate of the tree, at the point of his contemplation of the possibilities confronting him and his decision to take of the tree and eat. For Adam, in that initial state was, at the time, faced with two very different possibilities. He was confronted with differing advice and instructions from God on the one hand, and from the devil on the other. At that point, and under the stress of which he was now conscious, he decided that he would not accept the advice and instruction of either, simply on the grounds of the identity of the one offering the suggestion. Rather, Adam decided that he would decide for himself. That was, at its root, the false assumption of autonomy that constituted his sin. It is the same false assertion of

⁴¹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (various editions), lines 1–4.

autonomy that has principally characterized the state of fallen man ever since. To sum up the matter, sin is a repudiation of covenantal obligations.

But if, as is now adequately clear, we have to bear in mind that the hearer of the gospel does not, in the general case, have any understanding of what we are talking about, how, then, we have said, can anyone believe the message and turn to Christ? How can our preaching ministry yield any profit? The disciples of our Lord on one occasion asked him the very same question: “Who then can be saved?” And our Lord’s answer strikes to the very center of our present problem: “With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible” (Matt 19:25–26). God works in a mysterious way, that is, and by the direction of his Holy Spirit he so effects a secret work within the soul of a man that he is veritably changed to a soulish state in which he begins to understand.

Let me state that differently and in a manner that bears directly on what we confronted at an earlier point of this study. Our Lord stated the case when, in an atmosphere of disappointment that not all his hearers heard and understood the import of his remarkable discourse on his identity as the bread of life (John 6), he gave expression to his confidence and knowledge, on the other hand, that though the Jews on that occasion were blunt of understanding, “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out” (John 6:37). The explanation of it all lay in the fact that “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him” (John 6:44). And “Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of [or by or from] the Father, cometh unto me” (John 6:45). What is at issue is that only those come to Christ in repentance, confession of their sin that has outraged the holiness of God, and with a cry for mercy in Christ, who have at that time become acutely conscious of their lost estate. No man becomes a Christian unless and until he is enlightened to the extent that that shock of self-realization occurs in the depths of his soul. It is the work of the Spirit of God that enlightens a man to that effect. In short, only those come to Christ in whom the Holy Spirit has effected that change of heart and mind that has been referred to in historic Reformed theology as regeneration.

At this point we reflect again on the position of the union-with-Christ theologians who, we observed previously, have no explicit place in their system of thought for regeneration. We have seen Gaffin’s dilemma on the point when he concluded that “Paul explicates the inception of the application of redemption without recourse to the terminology of regeneration or new birth understood as a ‘communication of a new principle of life.’”⁴² And in saying that, Gaffin acknowledges that he is departing from the classic theology advanced on the point by, for example, Hodge, Berkhof, and Kuyper.⁴³ Gaffin’s orientation of thought on the resurrection of Christ and the participation in that of the Christian believer gives rise to his failure to see in classic Reformed theology the prior necessity of that regenerating work of the Spirit in the soul before a man turns to Christ. Indeed, we have seen him say that in his system of thought, quite rightly as he sees it, it is a significant question whether “the notion of a distinct enlivening act (causally or temporally) [regeneration] prior to the initial act of faith serves this end [of correctly stating the terms of applied soteriology] or is not rather itself a distortion of Paul’s viewpoint.”⁴⁴

⁴² Gaffin, *Resurrection and Redemption*, 140.

⁴³ *Op. cit.*, 140, footnote 13.

⁴⁴ *Op. cit.*, 142.

What do we understand, then, as that enlightening, enlivening work of the Spirit of God in the soul of a man that turns him to Christ? Regeneration is the secret, sovereign, and unsolicited work of the Holy Spirit of God in the soul whereby the faculties of the soul are endowed with abilities and capacities they did not previously possess, and a new habitus or principle of action is thereby implanted in the soul. Regeneration is a secret work of the Spirit in that it is a disposal of the sovereign purpose of God within the man who does not previously ask for the blessing of regeneration. Unregenerate man cannot ask anything of God because he is, as we have seen, dead in trespasses and sins. In that sense we say that regeneration is unsolicited; unsolicited because, again, before God sovereignly endows that blessing on a man, the man is dead in sin. He is, as we have seen, the dupe and slave of the devil. By regeneration the soul is enlivened to see plainly what was there to be seen all along but was concealed from the human consciousness by the darkening, deadening impact on the soul of the mastery of the devil.

We might expand our understanding of regeneration briefly at this point to ask what is to be understood as the benefits, more comprehensively stated, that are conveyed to the awakened sinner by the sovereign act of regeneration. Those benefits, we can say, are fourfold. By regeneration or, we may say, by what we saw at the beginning was the transference from the darkness of sin to the kingdom of God's dear Son (Col 1:13), the erstwhile sinner is joined to Christ in an organic, vital, spiritual, and indissoluble union. That union, we have said, is organic, because by that means the individual beneficiary is introduced to the organic entity of the church. It is a vital and spiritual union because the very life that it involves is inaugurated and sustained by the Holy Spirit. And the union is indissoluble because it foresees and guarantees that the individual will, in fact, be preserved by the grace of God and will be raised up at the last day by the resurrection power of God into eternal and everlasting life. Then the redeemed individual will see his savior face to face, and "we shall see him as he is, for we shall be like him" (1 John 3:2).

Second, and expanding on the fact that at the moment of regeneration one is introduced organically to membership of the church that Christ has redeemed, the benefit of a spiritual baptism into the church is conveyed, as stated in 1 Corinthians 12:13, "By one Spirit we are baptized into one body."

Third, at regeneration the benefit of the sealing of (or by) the Holy Spirit is conveyed to the new-born sinner. We have it at Ephesians 4:30, "Grieve not the Holy Spirit, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption." That sealing is not experiential in the sense that it is a unique experience of an individual at an observable point in time. It is not the case that some regenerate Christians may have been sealed by the Spirit while others may not have enjoyed that particular blessing. The seal is God's seal. It identifies to him those who, by his grace of regeneration, have become his sons and daughters. They are his property, they belong to him, and the truth cannot be denied that "the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his" (2 Tim 2:19). Of course, as with all aspects and benefits of regeneration, an individual who has been blessed by that secret grace of God will go on to experience a widening awareness of what it means to him to have become the new creation of God (2 Cor 5:17). In so many aspects of God's dealing with us, the objective fact of a blessing conveyed in regeneration is one thing, while the individual's subjective awareness of its meaning and

significance is another. That latter awareness grows and expands into an increasingly fuller realization of the inestimable benefits that God in his grace has conferred.

Fourth, it is at the point of regeneration that one is the beneficiary of the grace of adoption as one of the sons of God. The scriptural data are copious. “As many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name” (John 1:12). And “When the fulness of the time had come, God sent forth his Son . . . that we might receive the adoption of sons” (Gal 4:4–5). That, it is critical to note, was the fulfillment of the divine purpose that has been formulated in the divine council before the foundation of the world. For as we have it in the majestic paragraph in the first chapter of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, “God the Father . . . hath chosen us in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world . . . having predestinated us unto the adoption of children [ESV, “sons”] . . . according to the good pleasure of his will” (Eph 1:3–5).

When, in that sovereign work of regeneration in the soul, a sinner is translated into the kingdom of God’s dear Son and is thereby adopted as a son of God, his union with Christ that is concomitant with that divine action implies the conveyance to him of the whole benefit that Christ accomplished for him. As has been said, in the subsequent unfolding of historical time, and with greater or lesser gradualness, the renewed sinner will come into an expanding and conscious awareness of the scope of those benefits. In that way the *ordo salutis* comes to its fullest experiential effect and significance. That process takes up the new-born sinner’s repentance and confession of sin, the meaning of which has now been conveyed to him, and his expression of saving faith in Christ. At that point, God’s declaration of forensic justification follows, and progressive sanctification ensues.

It should be noted, further, that the familiar analogy from human family adoption to adoption into the family of God breaks down at a critical point. For in human family adoption the adopted child does not, and cannot, partake of, or assume the nature of the adopting father. But in adoption as sons of God, the remarkable fact is that the nature of God the Father is conveyed to the son. That reality is due to the very nature of the renewing work of the Spirit of God in the depths of the soul, conveying the grace of regeneration. That means that when we reflect on the adoption as sons of God, the remarkable truth is that we are sons of God by birth, by the new birth, being born again by the gracious regenerating Spirit of God. As to the relation between regeneration and adoption, Murray judicially observes that “There is a close relation between adoption and regeneration. . . . It is the same Holy Spirit who regenerates who is also sent into the hearts of the adopted, crying Abba Father. But adoption itself is not simply regeneration, nor is it the Spirit of adoption – the one is prerequisite, the other is consequent.”⁴⁵

The Westminster Confession states in its chapter “Of Adoption” that “All those that are justified, God vouchsafeth in and for his only Son Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption.”⁴⁶ It may appear from that statement that in terms of the classic Reformed *ordo salutis* the grace of adoption necessarily follows that of justification. But the Confession does not necessarily have such a time line in view at that point. It is simply saying that those who are justified are also adopted as sons into the family of God.

We should understand, again, that it is not being said that at the point of regeneration one who has received the grace of God to that effect is necessarily aware of

⁴⁵ Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 166–67.

⁴⁶ Westminster Confession of Faith, XII.

the remarkable extent of the blessings of grace that has occurred to and within him. At that point, what we have referred to as real historical time again comes to relevance and focus. There is necessarily a time lapse in actual fact between the sovereign endowment of salvific benefits and an individual's experiential realization of all the benefits he has received. Of that time lapse, which may be shorter or longer, theological opinions have varied. An interesting case in point occurs in John Murray's reference to regeneration and the exercise of saving faith that is endowed in that initial grace. Murray observes that "Regeneration pushes itself into consciousness and expresses itself in the exercises of faith and repentance."⁴⁷ The "pushing itself into consciousness" must be understood to apply on more levels of an individual's growing to awareness than we can refer to at this time.

Who is it to whom and in whom the Spirit of God works that remarkable work of regeneration? The answer again takes us back to the beginning. We recognize that the work of salvation is due entirely and in all its stages and applications to the sovereign grace of God, for it is clearly stated that "By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God" (Eph 2:8). And the beneficiaries of that work are precisely, as we referred to them at the beginning, those whom, from all eternity, the Father gave to the Son to redeem. Thus the circle of redemption begins in the grace of God conceived in eternity before the foundation of the world, it continues in the salvific work of the Son of God as contemplated in that divine council, and it comes to actual fruition in the redemption of those elect individuals in this life and in, prospectively, the eternal age in which the redeemed and glorified saints will live with God.

Conclusion

At this point, let us return to the beginning and look again at the principal question that has motivated our study. We are concerned with the meaning and the processes of what we have termed applied soteriology. We see now that a principal question that emerges is that of what is the object of faith. One scheme of things has suggested that the central motif of applied soteriology (at least Paul's soteriology) is the expression of union with the resurrected Christ by faith. Another conclusion tells us that the central motif is the expression of faith in Christ and his actual salvific work and, in short, the justification by faith in him in his act of substitutionary atonement and redemption. We prefer the latter and classic deliverance of Reformed theology. For what is to be said of the former, and its emphasis on the fact that the salvific benefits stem from "union with the resurrected Christ by faith"? What is to be understood in that system of thought as the meaning of the sinfulness of sin that made redemption necessary, of the wrath of God against sin, of the urgent need for repentance that allies itself with saving faith, and of the actual conveyance to the sinner of all that the redeeming grace of God implies and carries with it? It may be all very well to say with Garner, for example, that "adoption . . . [is] the mystical union with the Son by the Spirit."⁴⁸ But the question that calls for urgent consideration is that of precisely what it is, under the heading of applied soteriology, that the Spirit does in relation to God's sovereign purposes of redemption and the relation of those purposes to human action and responsibility. It is true that the Spirit is the executive

⁴⁷ John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray, Volume two* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 198.

⁴⁸ Garner, *op. cit.*, 115.

of the Godhead,⁴⁹ but doctrinal theology requires an investigation of the manner in which the Spirit does, in fact, accomplish the salvific work assigned to him under the divine counsel of redemption.

Our interest in what we have said to this point is in the questions that have to do with applied soteriology. Let me conclude by bringing to the surface of our consideration in that area the important matter of the preaching of the gospel. We do not repeat at this point what has been said regarding either the state of soul of the hearer and the necessity of regeneration or the new birth that is precedent to a sinner's turning to Christ. We hark back to the beginning and raise what, on the practical level of the application of soteriology, is the simple matter of the presentation of the gospel. If sinners are to be invited, even pressured, to turn to Christ for redemption, what is it we ask of them? Is it that they must accept Christ by, as one school of thought has it, an assertion of "union with the resurrected Christ by faith"; or is it that they must see the crucified Christ dying a substitutionary death to pay the penalty for sin, and that those who, at last, have seen the meaning of their sin may come to Christ and receive all the benefits of the salvation he has provided? Our decided preference is for the latter. It follows that we prefer to say that the "central motif of Paul's applied soteriology" is, in fact, "justification by faith."⁵⁰ (See Acts 13:38–39). For what are we to understand as the commission that Paul had received? He states it plainly in his defense before king Agrippa: "The Lord said, I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, delivering thee from the people and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins . . ." (Acts 26:16–18). Paul calls his hearers to the realization and confession of sin, to the embrace of Christ who died for sinners, and thereby to joys eternal in Christ. But as Paul's commission states, all that is possible only as the grace of God in his regenerating power "opens their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light . . . that they may receive forgiveness of sin." And in that process the hard realities of the awakening of the regenerated sinner's consciousness in real historical time is vitally involved.

As we focus our thought in such a way on the question of applied soteriology, we are drawn to the conclusion that while there is mystery involved in the disclosure of the works of God, we do not faint at our inability to understand perfectly and completely. We remember that we are of the earth earthy, and that God is in heaven, and in the presence of the mystery of God's infallible works we bow before him and worship.

⁴⁹ See George Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), 4.

⁵⁰ See Gaffin, *Resurrection and Redemption*, 132.