

## Covenantal Justification

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My objective in this paper is to address certain doctrinal and practical issues that arise in considering the following statement in the fourteenth chapter of the Savoy Declaration of Faith: "The principal acts of saving faith are *accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone* for *justification, sanctification, and eternal life*, by virtue of the *covenant of grace*."<sup>1</sup>

The phrases I have italicized indicate the essential relationship that should be prominent in our confession of faith at this time. First, saving faith is a matter of "accepting, receiving, and resting on Christ alone." Second, the end in view as the reward of saving faith is "justification, sanctification, and eternal life." And third, both the end in view and the means to that end are "by virtue of the covenant of grace."

The divine intentions of the covenant of grace led uninterruptedly to the cross of Christ. The death of Christ on the cross, tragic as it was, was not a catastrophe for which no reason existed or was to be found. It was not merely a random episode, a blip on the course of history that could, when it occurred, be shunted aside as the lives of men and nations moved on. On the cross of Christ, the Son of God, with a deliberateness born of divine counsel, died in the place of sinners. The apostle Peter on the Day of Pentecost stated to the "men of Israel" that they had "by wicked hands crucified and slain" one who was "delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:22–23).

It was true that the people on that day did not know what they were doing. For as the apostle Paul was later to say, "none of the princes of this world," not Caiaphas or Pontius Pilate or the leaders of Israel, or, for that matter, the common people, had sufficient understanding to know that they were crucifying the Lord of glory. For as Paul said, "had they known it [had they known that it was the long-promised Messiah they were crucifying], they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor 2:8). The death of Christ was, on the level of its actual occurrence, an act of ignorance. But the ignorance, though it was sincere, was culpable. Christ had come "unto his own, and his own received him not" (John 1:11), because their eyes were blinded and they could not see.

That the death of Christ occurred in accordance with divine counsel, that it fulfilled the terms of the covenant of grace, is stated quite clearly in the seventeenth-century confessions of faith that systematized the Reformed theology. Those confessions strike to the heart of what encapsulates the significance of the cross of Christ. That is that by repentance, faith, and trust in Christ the believing sinner is justified from his sin and

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<sup>1</sup> Savoy Declaration of Faith. XIV:2, italics added, and similar loc. cit. in the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Second London (Baptist) Confession.

enters into a new life in union with Christ. The Confessions at the point indicated, we have seen, are saying two things. First, those acts of saving faith (“accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ”) have efficacy for the objectives they realize (“justification, sanctification, and eternal life”) only by reason of the benefits accruing from “the covenant of grace.” Then it follows, secondly, that both the acts themselves and the objectives they realize are what they are because they were foreordained in the divine formulation of the covenant of grace. We state that second conclusion in other terms. It is not only that the covenant of grace contemplated the *ends* and *objectives* that have been stated. But the very *means*, the acts themselves that conduce to those ends, have been foreordained as elements of the covenant of grace. Every instance of individual saving faith is itself foreordained as an integral aspect of that covenant. What that is saying is that salvation in all its parts is by the grace of God. It destroys every suggestion that salvation is an autosoterism on an individual’s part on the one hand, or a divine-human synergism on the other. Against the autosoterism of the Pelagians and the synergism in the semi-Pelagianism of Rome, the gospel insists that salvation is a divine monergism.<sup>2</sup>

If, then, our doctrines of salvation and the Christian life are to be biblically-consistent they must also find their grounding in the biblical doctrine of the covenant. It is for that reason that Reformed theology has been properly described as covenant theology. The reality and the meaning of God’s covenantal purpose provide the fundamental hermeneutical principle in terms of which we hear the Scriptures speak. By that we mean that when we marshal our understanding of the acts of salvation under the heading of the *ordo salutis*, each of those acts is to be seen as covenantally grounded and warranted. In the present instance of saving faith and justification, God’s declarative-forensic statement of justification is what it is, it conveys its peculiar significance to those who are the beneficiaries of it, and it sustains its relation to all of the saving acts of God because its occurrence and import are vital aspects of the administration of God’s covenant of grace. We speak, therefore, of covenantal justification.

We have referred to the fact that salvation is a divine monergism because it is

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<sup>2</sup> Pelagius was a British monk who claimed that the faculties of the soul had not been subject to depravity as a result of Adam’s fall in the manner we shall go on to explore. He argued, as Harnack observes in his *Outlines of the History of Dogma* (Boston: Beacon, 1957), 370, that “All men stand in the condition of Adam before his fall.” Every person, therefore, “is able to resist every sin [and] he must do so.” In his larger work on the *History of Dogma* (New York: Dover 7 vols. 1951), 5:175, (quoted in Sproul, *Faith Alone* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995] 136), Harnack refers to the Pelagian doctrine as stated at the Synod of Carthage in the year 418 as claiming that “man can be without sin and keep the divine commands easily if he will.” For Pelagianism in its varying degrees the will is perfectly free to accept or reject the offer of salvation that Christ provided. Effectively, therefore, anyone who is saved is saved by his own decision and choice, and the sovereign grace of God is not necessarily involved in salvation in any prior sense. Man effectively saves himself. That is “autosoterism.” In the semi-Pelagianism of Roman Catholic theology, salvation is a matter of cooperation between the grace of God and the freewill choice of the individual person. That is effectively a “synergism.” It again diminishes the biblical meaning of the grace of God and robs God of his sovereignty. Salvation, as we shall go on to see, is a “divine monergism” (salvation is due to God alone), not an “autosoterism” or a divine-human “synergism.”

grounded in the divinely-appointed and substitutionary suffering, obedience, sacrifice, resurrection, and heavenly session of Christ. That monergism is further exhibited in the fact that the individual's saving faith, the instrumental cause of justification, is in turn the sovereign and unsolicited endowment of the Spirit of God to the human soul. We say, therefore, that the suffering of Christ is to be understood as a covenantal suffering, as his incarnation was a covenantal incarnation, his obedience and death a covenantal obedience and death, and all of the aspects of his salvific accomplishment are in the same manner covenantally qualified. The monergistic circle that establishes and guarantees salvation is closed, accordingly, in the reality that saving faith is itself to be understood as covenantal faith. That is to say, all aspects of salvation occur within, and they discover their full meaning under the rubric of, the covenant of grace. For that reason we conclude that what we have been accustomed to refer to in our doctrinal formulation as the elements of the *ordo salutis* or the application of the benefits of redemption, as well as the acts of God that are aspects of the accomplishment of redemption, are to be understood as covenantally qualified in the sense we have stated.

### **Covenant-making God**

To see clearly what is at issue in the relations we have raised it is necessary to adduce briefly certain aspects of God's self-revelation and his revelatory statement of purpose. We acknowledge, first, that all of reality external to the Godhead is, by virtue of God's creative word, covenantally structured. By God's creative fiat, reality was structured in such a way as to conduce to the glory of God, and when the day of creation's groaning because of sin is ended the proclamation of God's glory will be complete, eternal, and everywhere visibly declared. The objectives of God's covenant with his creation, both his real and personal creation, will then be realized, a consummation guaranteed by reason of the cosmic significance of the work of Christ. But of immediate concern is that within that covenantal creation structure man himself is a covenant creature. We shall see some of the implications of that in the discussion of our first parents' repudiation of their covenantal obligations and the rescue that the covenant of grace has provided. For sin, we shall observe, is in its essence a repudiation of covenantal obligations.

The terms and significance of God's salvific covenant are to be seen as reflective of the self-disclosure that God has made. To understand God's salvific purpose it is necessary to reflect, first, on what God has revealed as to his being and holiness. We hold at the beginning to the aseity of God, in that in his being and existence he is not dependent on any cause external to himself. If it were imagined that there was any entity, law, canon, or possibility external to the Godhead on which God was dependent or to which he stood eternally in relation, we would be speaking of a god lower than the eternal God who has revealed himself in the ways the Scriptures declare. When he spoke into existence all reality external to the Godhead, God created time as a mode of finite existence, and he spoke that reality into the time that he had made. In his eternal day he

exists outside of time. His knowledge of himself and of external reality, therefore, is timeless. In his timelessness God knew all things in one eternal act of knowing. He does not wait to discover. His knowledge is not sequential. He neither remembers nor forgets, because he knows all things in that eternal moment. He therefore does not wait to discover his own future. He does not change, but in his eternal will he wills all changes. Because he has willed the future he knows the future and he does not wait to discover it or what it will contain. We bow before the mystery.

In making those statements we have firmly rejected the recent claims of Open Theism as a system of theology. That scheme of things, dependent as it is on an earlier Socinianism, holds to a particular view of God's omniscience. Against what we hold in the Reformed tradition as the omniscience of God, the Open Theism theology embraces a decidedly alien conception. It states that God is, in fact, omniscient. But by that it means that God is omniscient in that he knows all that is available to be known. But then, as the future has not yet occurred, and nothing that the future will contain has yet eventuated, the future is not yet available to be known. God, therefore, does not and cannot know it. That claim contains the essence of the so-called "Process Theology" that was current in the twentieth century and which claims, as Paul Helm has summarized it, "not only that God is in time but that it is essential to God that he changes, that his own character matures as he experiences the love, disappointment, and frustration of his creation."<sup>3</sup>

Now it is not necessary to speak further at length at this time of the doctrine of God, or, that is, of theology proper. But to see the manner of accomplishment of his saving purpose we bring into focus on the basis of the Scriptural data God's existence as a trinity of Persons, such that the full essence of the Godhead resides in each of the Persons. Given the eternal autotheotic nature of the Son and the Holy Spirit, both the Son and the Holy Spirit are fully God. An instance of what is involved is contained in the words of our Lord himself: "I and my Father are one" (John 10:30), and Christ referred to himself as "the Son of man which is in heaven" (John 3:13). When he was in this world, that is to say, our Lord as to his human nature was in the world, while as to his divine nature he was both in this world and in heaven. If, contrary to our doctrine that the full essence of God is the possession of each of the divine Persons, we were to say that the essence of God was distributed among the Persons, we would then be speaking of not a trinity, but of a quaternity of entities, namely the three divine Persons plus the essence that was in some sense shared between them. We would in that case be not trinitarians but quaternitarians.

As we wish to hold in view the redemptive offices of the Persons of the Godhead, we note from the statement we have just made the autotheotic nature of both the second and third Persons of the Godhead. Of God the Son we say that as to his nature he is autotheotic, while as to his Person he is of the Father. And of the Holy Spirit we say that as to his nature he is autotheotic, while as to his Person he is of the Father and the Son. In

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Helm, *Eternal God: A Study of God without Time* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), xi.

holding to that formulation we are in agreement with the *filioque* clause in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed which, as we have it today, states that “the Holy Spirit . . . proceeds from the Father and the Son.”<sup>4</sup>

We refer, now, to the divine council of redemption in which the three Persons of the Godhead were engaged. We have it at Ephesians 1:11 that God “worketh all things after the counsel of his own will.” We bring to emphasis that the “*counsel*” of God was the outcome of the divine “*council*.” We do so in order to hold in view at the same time the distinguishable hypostases (persons) of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, while we hold to the mysterious truth that the full essence of the Godhead resides in each of the Persons. We are directed, thereby, to consider the distinguishable redemptive offices assumed by the respective Persons of the Godhead in the accomplishment and application of redemption. What, then, is to be said of the outcome of the divine council?

### **God’s covenantal declaration**

We are interested at this point in two questions, having to do with both the *parties* to God’s covenants on the one hand, and the *subjects* of the covenants on the other. As to the covenant of redemption, we have already implied that the parties to the covenantal agreement and undertaking were the three Persons of the Godhead in their distinguishable personhoods. The redemptive office of the Father was that of electing a designated people for redemption and his giving those persons to his Son to redeem. In his assumption of redemptive office, the Son voluntarily undertook to come into the world, to assume human nature into union with his divine nature (yet without sin), to satisfy the demands of God’s law on behalf of, and to bear in his death the penalty of the guilt of the sin of, those whom the Father had given to him for that purpose. The Holy Spirit undertook to apply to those people in due time the benefits of the redemption that Christ accomplished and to conduct them to glory.

In order to bring to effect the objectives of the covenant of redemption thus declared, it was necessary to establish what we may refer to as an implementing covenant that is contemplated as the covenant of grace. The *parties* to the covenant of grace are God on the one hand and those whom he has chosen to redeem on the other. Or more particularly, we may say that the parties were God on the one hand and the *subjects* of the covenant *as they were represented by Christ*. We leave aside for the present a not unimportant question that has exercised the mind of the church from time to time, namely that of whether we should take a supralapsarian (before the fall) or an infralapsarian (after the

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<sup>4</sup> The word *filioque* (and from the Son) was current at the time of the earlier councils of the church (Nicea, 325, Constantinople, 381, Ephesus, 431, and Chalcedon, 451), but the clause was inserted in the creed only at the Synod of Toledo in 589. Its incorporation in the creed gave rise to what was henceforth referred to as “the Filioque clause,” and its adoption became the occasion of a divergence between the Western and Eastern churches that remains at the present time. The Eastern church continues to reject the filioque clause.

fall) view of the subjects of the covenant of grace.

More important for the present is the fact that the subjects of the decree to redeem, the subjects who were the beneficiaries of the redemption that Christ provided, and the subjects of the Holy Spirit's undertaking to sanctify and conduct to glory were precisely the same persons. It is important to insist on that relation because it has been denied by errant doctrines of salvation such, for example, as that of the Arminians. For in that scheme of things it is argued that Christ died, in fact, for all men indiscriminately. But as to the calling and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, it is claimed that the subjects of the Spirit's work are not *all* men, but only *some* men. In the Arminian scheme, the Holy Spirit conducts his work of applying the benefits of the death of Christ only to those who, in their sovereign decision, accept the offer of salvation that Christ provided. But it is to be noted that if, in some such way, we were to claim a difference between the subjects of Christ's work of redemption and that of the Holy Spirit, we would thereby be driving a wedge between the works of the respective Persons of the Godhead. But if we drive a wedge between the *works* of the divine Persons, we are thereby driving a wedge between the *knowledge* of the divine Persons. And fatally, if we drive a wedge between the *works* and *knowledge* of the Persons we are driving a wedge between the *being* of the Persons of the Godhead. That is because we hold that the divine mind, the divine emotions of affection and disposition, and the divine will, or in other words the total essence of the Godhead, are fully the property of each of the three divine Persons. In the outcome, then, the Arminian view completely destroys the doctrine of the unity and the oneness of God. We are in that case left with a completely unbiblical doctrine of God and our entire theological enterprise has fallen to the ground.

### **The first and successive statements of the gospel**

Consider now the statement and meaning of the gospel of grace. We reflect, for that purpose, on the statement of the apostle John in his first epistle. He sets out to place before his readers "That which we have seen and heard" (1 John 1:3), and he proceeds to remind them of what the good news of the gospel is. "This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you" (1 John 1:5). And then the very first words that follow, the first statement of the gospel, are "that God is light." What is being said is that as the gospel is the gospel of God, the first statement of the gospel is that God is a holy God. It is true, of course, that the gospel is addressed to fallen and sinful men (using the word "men" at this point generically to refer to all people). But though it is addressed to men, the first statement it makes is not about men. It is not directly about the condition in which men stand as the gospel comes to them. The first statement of the gospel, which, clearly, should determine the form of our declaration of it, is a statement about God. It is the statement that we have to do with a holy God, and then it will follow in the second place that the only real and true explanation of the human condition turns on the fact that the state of sin in which we stand as a result of Adam's fall is that we have offended and

outraged the holiness of God.

At that point, then, we can legitimately announce the further words of the gospel. The gospel, that is, is at a minimum, and apart from the wider aspects and implications of it, a three-part statement. We can go so far as to say that it is a reliable criterion of proper preaching to consider the relation that exists between those parts. The first statement is, as we have seen, that we have to do with a holy God. The second statement has to do with the explanation of the state in which we stand as the gospel comes to us. And the third statement is that which clarifies the substitutionary work of Christ by which sinners are redeemed. The second and third parts of that declaration of the gospel as the apostles contemplated them are clear: Christ died for sinners (1 Tim 1:15) and in due time Christ died for the ungodly (Rom 5:6). But the statement of the confession that we adduced at the beginning now comes into clearer focus. The sinner's critical need, it is rightly said, is the discovery of some means to attain to "justification, sanctification, and eternal life." The instrumental condition the gospel announces at that point is "accepting, receiving, and resting on Christ alone." But the twofold question arises as to why, more precisely, that condition is what it is, and what it is about the work of Christ that makes the fulfillment of the conditions effective to the desired end. We take the first of those questions first. In doing so, we discover a direct linkage to the terms of the covenant of grace that the confession has already invoked in the same context.

The gospel comes to those whose natural state of alienation from God is what it is because of their inheritance of the guilt of Adam's sin. Adam had been established by God as a public person, in the sense that he was the federal or representative head of all those who were to descend from him by ordinary generation. By reason of the immediate imputation to them of the guilt of Adam's sin they were constituted sinners. And as a result all men come into the world with a fallen and sinful nature. We keep clear in our doctrine the twofold implication for Adam's posterity of his dereliction from the obligations of the covenant in which God had established him: first, the imputation to his posterity of the guilt of his sin; and second, the transmission of a fallen nature with which all men come into the world. It is not true to say that all men are sinners because they come into the world with a fallen nature. The contrary is true. All men come into the world with a fallen nature because they were constituted sinners by Adam's fall. The fifth chapter of the letter to the Romans is eloquent on the point (Rom 5:12-21). The question to be addressed is not why God should have ordained that the consequences of Adam's sin should involve his posterity in the respect stated. The fact is that God in the wisdom of his will and intention ordered and structured his creation in that manner. Mystery exists in God's action in involving all men in Adam's sinful act. John Murray judiciously observes that "it is not ours to solve all mysteries and by no means ours to call in question the government of God in inflicting the whole race with the penal consequences of Adam's own sin."<sup>5</sup> We observe that because God spoke all things, real and personal, into

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<sup>5</sup> John Murray, *The Imputation of Adam's Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 85.

existence, they remain his property, and he is free to do with them what he wills. It is clear from the word that God has given in the Scriptures that his ordinations and intentions with regard to all men are informed by his grace and love. It was the love of God that sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sin (1 John 4:10).

But what, we must ask, was the primeval sin that spread its infection to Adam's race? The terms of the probation under which our first parents were established are well known. In the event, they ate of the forbidden fruit. But in construing the meaning of their sin it is appropriate to recall that they were created as covenant creatures. God at the beginning, we have said, spoke all things external to the Godhead into existence. The all things included all real and material things and our first parents who were created in his image. In that speaking into existence, all of reality, including, as we are now observing it, the human situation, was covenantally structured. As to our first parents, it is not that God created Adam and Eve and then superimposed his image on them, so that they became his image bearers. Rather, in his very constitution man *is* the image of God. He is the image of God in that he is created a rational, immortal, spiritual, moral, and speaking person.<sup>6</sup> And notwithstanding his inheritance of the effects of Adam's fall he remains the image of God. Man in sin is still a rational, immortal, spiritual, moral, and speaking person. It is that that underlies his continuing obligation to God from whose hands he has come.

That man is a covenant creature requires us to hold in view that at his creation he sustained, or was liable to, certain covenantal obligations. Those obligations included the mandate to discharge to the glory of God the offices of prophet, priest, and king. Adam was to be a prophet in that he was to investigate, understand, and explain the meaning of the reality in which he had come to self-consciousness. The essence of the prophetic office is explanation, and Adam had begun to discharge that office when he named the animals that were brought to him (Gen 2:20). His office as priest required him to dedicate that knowledge and understanding back to God, to live continuously in the state of holiness in which he stood, and to construct his life as a worship of God. The essence of the priestly office is the privilege of direct communication with God, and Adam enjoyed that privilege and worship initially when, before the fall, God walked with him "in the garden in the cool of the day" (Gen 3:8). He was to rule as a king over all of reality to the glory of God. But the meaning of his fall, in one of its most significant implications, is that as a result, he was no longer able to discharge those prophetic, priestly, and kingly offices.

In essence, Adam was obligated under the terms of the covenant of creation, sometimes referred to as the covenant of works under which he stood in relation to God, to conduct his life in obedience to the law of God. Obedience to law is of the essence of covenantal obligation. It is for that reason that the apostle summarized the relations

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<sup>6</sup> I have discussed man as the image of God more fully in my *Christian Confession and the Crackling Thorn* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004), chapter 3.



involved in, first, the sin of Adam, and second, the rescue provided by Christ in precisely those terms. “For as by one man’s *disobedience* many were made sinners, so by the *obedience* of one shall many be made righteous” (Rom 5:19). The knowledge of the law of God was inherent in Adam’s created constitution, because for Adam to *be* was to *know*. In his pristine holy state he naturally knew God, he knew he had come from the hands of God, and he naturally knew and initially loved the law of God. The harmony of the faculties of soul that characterized his finite humanity was such that he was, at his creation, constitutionally holy. It is the grave mistake of certain theologies to claim that Adam was created, not in a state of constitutive holiness, but in a state of moral and ethical neutrality. In line with that theology it is then said that Adam’s holiness was a *donum superadditum* (a gift-added-on) that he received subsequent to his creation. But it is not the case that God first created Adam and then gave him the gift of holiness. Such an errant theology, it should be seen, leads immediately to a less than biblical understanding of the meaning of the fall. For it implies that all that happened at the fall was that Adam was deprived of the gift of holiness that had been given to him in the first place. As a result, his condition of soul was then what it had been before the initial gift of holiness had been given to him. But the Scriptural doctrine of the fall is much more radical. For at the fall the harmony of the faculties of the soul was shattered, and the mind, the rational faculty, was deprived of the hegemony it had previously enjoyed in the characterization of the soul.

The essence of Adam’s sin is that in it he repudiated his covenantal obligations. That is always and essentially at its root the meaning of sin. Sin in its essence, we have said, is the denial of covenantal obligations. Adam was created in a state of constitutive holiness and righteousness. He was holy in that in all his faculties he was aligned to obedience to the law of God. He was righteous in that all of his decisions and actions prior to his fall were consistent with, and were informed by, the holiness of state in which he stood. But in his finitude he was defectible, mutable, in a state of *posse non peccare* (possible not to sin) but, as became too well-known, it was possible for him to fall. The denial of his covenantal obligation to live under the law of God came to expression in his assertion of autonomy from God. That assertion of autonomy, false and disastrous as it was, is most sharply instanced by his misuse of the rational faculty that had, up to that time, guided and determined all of his actions of soul. For when the tempter presented him with the lie that seduced him, he found himself in a strangely new position. Here he was confronted with two possible lines of action. He was now confronted with a mandate from his Creator and with a contrary suggestion and invitation from the devil. Which should he then choose? In effect Adam decided he would not automatically and with reflex action choose or believe either one or the other. Rather, and in this the assertion of autonomy enters, he would make up his own mind what he should choose and do. In that assertion of autonomy it became only too clear that he had, in fact, sold his soul to the devil. As that is the origin of sin, it has remained ever since the essential nature of sin, the false assertion of human autonomy against God.

Let me summarize in covenantal terms the meaning of what has been said. For the initial and created covenantal status that our first parents enjoyed projects its implications for all men since. When Adam sinned, the obligations to which he and all of his posterity since were obligated under the covenant of works were in no sense abolished. The reality is that all men since remain obligated to fulfill the requirements of the covenant of works in order that God will be honored as his holiness demands and requires.<sup>7</sup> If Adam had sustained his probation he would have been confirmed in holy state and admitted to eternal life. It is true that some theologians demur from the suggestion that if Adam had remained obedient to his covenantal obligations he would have *merited* eternal life. The notion of merit at that point is rejected by certain theological constructions. But we can hold with many Reformed theologians that as Hodge, for example, has commented, “Had he [Adam] retained his integrity he would have *merited* the promised blessing.”<sup>8</sup> That Adam would have merited the blessing of eternal confirmation in holy state as a reward for his obedience is clear from the fact that the second Adam, Christ, merited *his* reward on the grounds of *his* obedience. For the first Adam was a type of the second.

When we say that the obligations of the covenant of works remain for all men we are not saying that the covenant of works remains a way of life. While the covenant of works does not now continue as a way of entrance to life as it did in Adam’s initial state, the sinner in his natural state remains exposed to the curse that the covenant contemplated in the event of disobedience. We take only one comment from the extensive literature I have reviewed in other places I have referred to. A. A. Hodge, son of Charles Hodge and his successor at Princeton Theological Seminary in the nineteenth century, has commented that “This Covenant having been broken by Adam . . . and Christ having fulfilled all of its conditions in behalf of all his people . . . the covenant of works having been fulfilled by the second Adam is henceforth abrogated under the gospel. Nevertheless, since it is founded upon the principles of immutable justice, *it still binds all men who have not fled to the refuge offered in the righteousness of Christ.*”<sup>9</sup>

Hodge’s statement introduces us to the third element of the gospel. What, then, has Christ done in order that sinners might be redeemed and might be reestablished in reconciliation with God? We may put the answer in a sentence. The Second Person of the Godhead came into the world to be Jesus Christ for our redemption and to do for us what we were obligated to do under the covenant of works but were unable to do for ourselves; in doing that, he fulfilled the previously unfulfilled obligations under the covenant of works for which we were liable, but which we could not fulfill by reason of the state of sin in which we were bound. The relationship involved can therefore be put by observing

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<sup>7</sup> I have discussed the prelapsarian covenant more expansively in my *Divine Redemption and the Refuge of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2005), chapters 2 and 3. I have commented there on certain attempts in contemporary theology to diminish and disregard the continued relevance of the covenant of works.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (London: Thomas Nelson, 3 vols. 1873), vol. 2, 364, italics added.

<sup>9</sup> A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1972), 314, italics added.

that the covenant of grace was established, with the parties to it, the subjects it contemplated, and the requirements and objectives it specified, in order to provide a remedy for the delinquency under the covenant of works for which the people of God were liable.

Why, then, does the confessional statement with which we began state that “accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone” is the way to the realization of the benefits of “justification, sanctification, and eternal life?” It is because, as the hymn writer Cecil Frances Alexander captured the meaning of it: “There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin; / he only could unlock the gate of heav’n, and let us in.”<sup>10</sup> If we can speak with extreme care and with profound humility, it could be said that the problem that faced the Godhead in eternity was that of how any from among the offspring of Adam could be rescued from the state of sin to which they had fallen. As we have seen, the mystery of redemption is that a distribution of redemptive offices among the Persons of the Godhead meant that the Second Person, God the Son, would come into the world to redeem a people in the manner we have observed.

Because sin had entered the world in human nature it was necessary that the penalty for sin should be paid in human nature. The remarkable thing to be said regarding the accomplishment of redemption is that God himself gave for our sin what it was his own justice demanded. The Second Person of the Godhead came, therefore, to be our redeemer. He came as the great high priest, the antitype of the earlier Levitical priests, to administer the definitive sacrifice for sin and to be himself the offering that satisfied divine justice. He was not always Jesus Christ. He came into the world in order to *become* Jesus Christ. He came to die *in his human nature*, that the entailment of sin as it devolved on the people of God might be broken and that they might again be reconciled to him.<sup>11</sup>

A final point in that connection, which does not call for extended discussion at this time, can be noted. We have referred to the uniquely specified and voluntarily undertaken redemptive offices of the Persons of the Godhead. But it is of no small doctrinal significance that in all of the works of God external to the Godhead (the *opera ad extra*) the three Persons of the triune God are jointly engaged. Our Lord discharged his messianic assignment in this world in the strength given to him by the Father, “for God giveth not the Spirit by measure unto him” (John 3:34). And he stated that “The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do; for what things soever he doeth, these things also doeth the Son likewise” (John 5:19). We have it in the letter to the Hebrews that “Christ . . . through the eternal Spirit offered himself to God” (Heb 9:14).

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<sup>10</sup> Cecil Frances Alexander, “There is a green hill far away . . .” In *Trinity Hymnal* (Atlanta: Great Commissions Publications, 1990), 256, and various hymnals.

<sup>11</sup> I leave aside at this point the extensive discussion in the literature regarding what have been referred to as differing theories of the atonement. See Douglas Vickers, *Divine Redemption and the Refuge of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2005), 17–22, for a discussion of the early statement of the satisfaction theory of the atonement by Anselm, who served as Archbishop of Canterbury, 1093–1109.

We could expand also on the fact that the three Persons of the Godhead were jointly engaged in the creation of reality external to the Godhead. In the Genesis record we have it clearly that “*God* said.” And “the *Spirit* of God moved upon the face of the waters” (Gen 1:2-3). And “Let *us* make man in our image” (Gen 1:26). Further, John, referring to the Second Person of the Godhead who was fully God, has recorded that “All things were made by him” (John 1:3). The apostle Paul takes up the theme in his statement that “by him [Christ] were all things created” (Col 1:16).<sup>12</sup>

But while it remains to understand more fully the joint operation of the Persons of the Godhead, it nevertheless remains also that unique redemptive assignments were undertaken by the respective divine Persons. If that truth of revelation were not carefully guarded, the mistake could be made of assuming, as was done in earlier times in the heretical doctrine of Patripassianism, for example, that it was the Father who suffered.<sup>13</sup> That clearly was not so, in the respect that it was Christ who suffered and died for us *in his human nature*. But a further relation between the work of Christ and that of the Holy Spirit warrants our notice and will be observed in the following section.

### **The covenantal Christian life**

We said in our initial comment on the statement of the confession that has motivated our study that the very acts that conduce to the objectives of justification, sanctification, and eternal life, the *means* as well as the *objectives* and *ends*, have been ordained as integral to the divine formation of the covenant of grace. That is what we mean by saying that all of the parts and aspects of our redemption to eternal life are what they are by the grace of God. Let me now look some aspects of what is involved in that respect.

First, with recognition again of the pervasive implications of the fact that God’s relations with his people are covenantal relations, God’s covenantal lordship comes to effect in that he “works all things according to the counsel of his own will” (Eph 1:11).

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<sup>12</sup> We hold that the “us” in “Let us make man . . .” has reference to the triune Persons of the Godhead. For a contrary view see Bruce K. Waltke, *Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 127. As to the matter of creation, we find in the opening chapters of *Genesis* intimations of the triune existence of God. We do not concur with the argument of, for example, Waltke, who understands the “us” in Genesis 1:26 to refer to the heavenly host, not to the Persons of the Godhead. See Waltke, *op. cit.*, 201. Nor do we concur with the firmly stated commitment to “theistic evolution” that Waltke makes as to the origin of man in *ibid.*, 202–203. The contrary statement of John Murray in his comment on Genesis 1:26 is salutary: “To suppose that a process of evolution by forces resident in an order of things incalculably lower in the scale of being could account for man’s origin, involves an incongruity once we appreciate the identity of likeness to God. Genesis 2:7 cannot be reconciled with the evolutionary hypothesis, and it confirms the conclusions derived from Genesis 1:26; 5:1; 9:6.” Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, vol. 2, 1977), 12. Notwithstanding his attempt at explanation, Waltke’s evolutionism is not rescued by the insertion of the word “theistic” before “evolution.”

<sup>13</sup> On the early doctrine of Patripassianism see W.G.T. Shedd, *A History of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2 vols. 1868), vol. 1, 254; Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1964), 166.

If, as we have said, God in that divine working is sovereign in and over all of the affairs of men, does that sovereignty extend, we may ask, to *all* of the *actions* of men? We answer in the affirmative. Further, does that sovereignty extend to all of the *thoughts* of men? We again answer in the affirmative. And in that answer, as we shall see, we are anticipating a highly significant aspect of the work of the Holy Spirit in the process of the Christian believer's sanctification. In other words, the all-comprehending sovereignty of God requires it to be said that it is not possible for any individual to *do* anything that God has not ordained. It is not possible for man to *do* anything that God has not already thought. But further, our claim is that it is not possible for any individual to *think* anything that God has not already thought. "I know the thoughts that come into your mind," God has said, "every one of them" (Ezek 11:5). He knows the thought because he ordained the thought. "The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord" (Prov 16:33). More particularly, "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water; he turneth it whithersoever he will" (Prov 21:1).

The meaning of what is involved might be startling on its surface and it no doubt challenges in our thought the question of individual personal freedom or, as it most forcibly comes to expression, the freedom of the human will. But it would be grossly inadequate to say that the Spirit of God orders only the *external* events and experiences in the life of the individual he is committed to bring to glory. The Spirit moves in the *innermost recesses of the soul*. He thinks the thoughts of holiness in us, and he thereby structures our lives and our progress. What else would be the meaning and import of the apostle's exclamation to the Galatians, "I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me" (Gal 2:20)? The hymn writer, Harriet Auber, has captured the meaning of what is involved in the hymn that begins, "Our blest Redeemer, ere He breathed / His tender, last farewell, / A guide, a comforter, bequeathed / With us to dwell." And in the penultimate stanza of the hymn the writer reflects on the ministry of that Comforter to the soul and states significantly that "Every thought of holiness [is] his alone."<sup>14</sup>

Secondly, we acknowledge that there is a mystery involved in the sovereign work of the Spirit of God in the soul of man. That mystery exists within the orbit of the working of the Spirit at the same time as the individual person himself works out his salvation. "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Phil 2:12-13). The statement is not simply to the effect that God by his grace gives to his people the ability and power to live in obedience to him. For the law of God remains the rule of life for God's people. That God does give grace to his people to that effect is, of course, true. But the text from the Philippian letter is saying, beyond that, that God does in fact accomplish in the lives of his people what he has ordained as the parts and progress of their conformation in holiness to the image of his Son. The Spirit is sovereign in sanctification. In that

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<sup>14</sup> Harriet Auber, *Our blest Redeemer, ere He breathed His tender, last farewell*, in *Congregational Praise* (hymnal). London: Independent Press, for the Congregational Union of England and Wales, 1951, 209.

sovereignty he is working sanctification in his people by communicating to them the communicable attributes of God to the extent that, and in the degree that, he is preparing them for the place God has ordained they will occupy in the eternal kingdom of glory. The work of the Holy Spirit in preparing the saints of God for their place in glory is analogous to what was involved in the preparation for the temple that Solomon built. "The house, when it was building, was built of stone made ready before it was brought thither; so that there was neither hammer nor axe nor any tool of iron heard in the house, while it was building" (1 Kings 6:7). So the Holy Spirit is at work in this life preparing his people for their place in heaven. For at the point of entrance to heaven the preparation will have been completed. There will be no further sanctification in heaven. The preparatory process of sanctification will have come to an end, and all will be ready for the glorious eternal temple of God. In the process to that end, the Spirit so supervises, orders, directs, and guides the operation of personal free wills that all that he has purposed does in fact eventuate.

But there is a further point to be noted. When the apostle states that God works in the Christian person "to will and to do of his good pleasure," a further and deeper divine prospect and objective come into view. The burden of the text should not be restricted to a manward aspect of what is involved, in the sense that concentration is confined to the benefits that accrue to the individual Christian in his own right. What the text contemplates is to be understood as contributing to the individual person's sanctification in the manner we have said. But in all of the divine working in and with his people, God's larger covenantal purposes and objectives must be held in view. What is involved in the Philippians statement, then, is that God has bestowed on the Christian believer, and that he continues by his sanctifying grace to bestow on his people, the high privilege of their being, under God, the means of furthering the realization of what God has purposed to do "of his good pleasure."

That is so in the sense, again, that it reflects what is to be said regarding God's purpose that all things should be done to his glory and should reflect his glory. God's glory consists in the demonstration to all his rational creatures, in heaven and in earth, of his infinite perfections. And when the Christian is enjoined to do all things to the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31), he is given the high privilege of being the reflection of that glory, in being the vehicle in whatever way God ordains of participating in and contributing to that high objective. So it is in the present case of the Christian believer's progress in sanctification. God works in the lives of his people in such a way that a twofold objective will be realized. First, by his working in them he gives them the motivation and encouragement to persevere in their part in the process of their sanctification. And second, by doing so he is using his sanctified people to further his objective of demonstrating his own glory. That is the high privilege of the Christian life.

But what is to be said of individual freedom? An answer to the question is necessary in order to understand further the sovereignty of the Spirit in the Christian believer's sanctification and in, therefore, the subjection of sanctification to the terms of the

covenant of grace.

We do not need to enter at this point the long and philosophic discussion of the freedom of the will. I have addressed that in other places.<sup>15</sup> The upshot of the question for our present purposes is that the individual will is not free in an isolated sense to determine its own action, but that it necessarily acts in conformity with the state, decisions, and motivations of the faculties of the soul. In Adam's prelapsarian state there existed an undisturbed harmony among the faculties. The soul was then characterized by free will in the fullest sense. The Westminster Shorter Catechism makes the point. When our first parents were "left to the *freedom of their own will*" they "fell from the estate wherein they were created."<sup>16</sup> That initial state of free will existed because the mind, the intellectual faculty, naturally knew God and responded with clarity and uncluttered reason to the knowledge of God that was inherent in Adam's created condition. At the same time, with the affective or emotional faculty Adam naturally loved God, and the natural disposition, the *habitus* implicit in the soul, moved our first parent to love the law of God and to love the work of obedience to it. In harmonious concurrence, then, the will was naturally instructed to obey God. There was at that time no discordance or possibility of disruption among the faculties so long as the initial state of righteousness was preserved.<sup>17</sup>

A highly significant sense exists, therefore, in which it can be said that at the fall man lost his free will. His intellectual faculty was henceforth blinded by the god of this world (2 Cor 4:4; 1 Cor 2:14) and his emotional faculty was enslaved by the devil to the extent that he was now a God-hater (Rom 1:30). Because with the mind man could no longer *know* God and the good that he required, and because with the heart now turned from God and enslaved to sin he could not *love* the good, the mind and the heart could no longer instruct the will to *do* the good. That was the sorry state to which Adam and his posterity were reduced by his dereliction from what God's covenant had required of him. We have seen that as a result of the fall man is disabled from the initial functions and prerogatives with which he was created. But as to action in general, and apart from the precise question of the knowledge of God and actions in accordance with the mandates of God, the question persists whether there exists any respect in which the will can be said to be free.

Our response must be that in all respects, and by the very nature of the constitution of the soul and human personhood, the will remains under the inevitable influence of the intellectual and emotional deliberations. When Jonathan Edwards said that the action of the will is "as the greatest apparent good is,"<sup>18</sup> he was laying down a principle which, of necessity, is universally explanatory of willing action. For example, a man may well have

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<sup>15</sup> See my *The Immediacy of God* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), chapters 3-5.

<sup>16</sup> Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 13, italics added.

<sup>17</sup> See the discussion in Cunningham, on "The Doctrine of the Will," in *Historical Theology*, vol. 1, 568–639.

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Freedom of the Will* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1996), 86.

decided at one time or another that excessive consumption of alcohol is a thing which, on the basis of his own established moral principles, he will avoid. But if, on a certain occasion, he takes alcohol to an excess and thereby defies what he had previously laid down as a moral principle, it is not to be said that he is doing so against his will. Nor can it properly be said that his will is free, in an isolated and independent sense, to take the alcohol or not take it. The situation in strict reality is that he took the alcohol because, at the point of taking it, it was apparent to him that in the situation that then existed that action was seen as “his greatest apparent good.” His reason and his emotional preferences at that time dictated that the preponderance of good rested in the action he then took. The action of taking the alcohol was not an independent act of the will. It was an act of the whole person.

What has just been said finds precise application in the ministry of the Spirit of God to and in the Christian life. While the will is free from outside compulsion, and while an individual cannot be forced to do something he does not will to do, nevertheless it is necessarily subject to the internal faculties of the soul in the manner we have seen, and, it can now be said, is subject to the mysterious supervision and direction of the will of God. For in the will of God, and under the control of the sovereign ordering of God, all of the forces of history and the formation of character that bear on the formation and functioning of an individual’s faculties transmit their effects, impulses, and determinations to the will and its actions.

The significance of what has been said for the individual believer’s progress in sanctification is clear. God works, and man works. But that working of God and man does not amount to a synergism such as is to be rejected when we speak of man’s justification and reconciliation with God. In that case there is not, and there could not be, any possibility of synergism, because at the time of the coming of the renewing grace of God the individual is “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph 2:1). In the present case of progress in sanctification, however, the working of the Christian person in the discharge of his ethical responsibilities that point to his sanctification is, as has now been said, decidedly under the supervision, direction, and support of the Holy Spirit.

We reflect further on what we have already contemplated as the divine covenant of redemption, and we recall the distribution of redemptive offices among the triune Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It was the declared and assigned office of the Holy Spirit to apply to those for whom Christ died the benefits of the redemption he accomplished and to conduct them to glory. But Paul has stated to the Corinthians that it is Christ who is the Christian’s sanctification. Christ is “of God made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and *sanctification*, and redemption” (1 Cor 1:30, italics added). That attribution to Christ is necessary and meaningful in two respects. First, it is the completion of the messianic-redemptive work of Christ that forms the basis of, or that provides the divinely accepted warrant for, the Holy Spirit’s work of sanctification. Second, when the relation between the work of Christ and that of the Spirit is seen in the form in which Christ himself stated it, it is clear that it is Christ himself who is



accomplishing the Christian's sanctification through his Spirit. For in his discourse to his disciples on the night on which he was betrayed he had given them the promise and explanation that "when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak. . . . He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and show it unto you" (John 16:13–14).

### **Eternal life**

Finally, we note from the confessional statement that has motivated our discussion that by virtue of the covenant of grace we have not only justification and sanctification, but, with that, eternal life. In the light of all we have said to this point some concluding observations can be made. Essentially, two questions are involved. First, it is necessary to see the interdependence between those threefold benefits of redemption and to appreciate their joint and several relations to God's announced terms of the covenant. And second, it is necessary, in the light of certain questionable proposals that have been made for paradigm changes in Reformed theology, to be clear as to what God's covenantal statement of justification does *not* mean and imply.

A careful reading of the confession makes it clear that "eternal life," as it is there stated as the culminating blessing of the covenant, is to be seen as referring to the state in which the Christian believer is established as a result of what God had ordained as the requirements of the covenant of grace. But eternal life, as the confession brings that into focus at that point, is not to be understood as a blessing that is *conditional upon*, in the sense that it *awaits*, justification and sanctification. It is true that a full realization of the fact and the benefits of eternal life *follows experientially* those other blessings. But the entrance to eternal life is to be guarded as *prior* to justification. That is because the entrance to eternal life turns on the fact, and the Holy Spirit's act, of an individual's regeneration by the sovereign grace of God. Regeneration is a sovereign, secret, and unsolicited act of the Holy Spirit whereby new life is created within the soul, the faculties of the soul are endowed with abilities and capacities they did not previously possess, and a new *habitus* or disposition or principle of action that seeks after God is implanted in the soul. It is appropriate to say that at regeneration the individual who is the beneficiary of that grace is "baptized into the body of Christ" (1 Cor 12:13), has the seal of God as belonging to him placed upon him, "sealed with that holy Spirit of promise" (Eph 1:13), and is joined to Christ in a vital and indissoluble union. The priority of that union has been well stated by Berkhof: "The initial act is that of Christ, who unites believers to himself *by regenerating them* and thus producing faith in them. On the other hand, the believer also unites himself to Christ by a conscious act of faith, and continues the union, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, by the constant exercise of faith."<sup>19</sup>

Berkhof has there stated concisely what we hold as the *ordo salutis*, or the order of

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<sup>19</sup> L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids : Eerdmans, 1939), 450, italics added.

application of redemption. He has emphasized the distinction between the *endowment* of faith on the one hand, or the endowment of the capacity to exercise faith, and the subsequent *exercise* of faith on the other. The *endowment* of faith is the *immediate* work of the Spirit of God that occurs at a point in time. The *exercise* of faith, or the activation of the newly endowed capacity of faith, occurs in time and may be characterized by any of several time dimensions. Murray observes in relation to those actions that “regeneration pushes itself into consciousness and expresses itself in the exercises of faith and repentance.”<sup>20</sup> But as to regeneration itself and the implications of it, Murray refers to regeneration as that act “of which faith and repentance are the immediate effects in our consciousness.”<sup>21</sup>

God’s statement of justification, consequent on the sinner’s expression of faith and repentance, is, then, a once-for-all forensic statement that regards the sinner as “just” because the righteousness of Christ has been imputed to him. In the most straightforward of terms, to be “just” in the eyes of God means that one’s relation to the law of God is what it ought to be. It is precisely the absence of that “justness” that characterizes the state of sin. The declaration of the gospel, therefore, is that God himself establishes the necessary state by placing to the sinner’s account the righteousness of Christ. We confront again the fact that Christ came into the world to be the sinner’s substitute in the twofold aspect of keeping the law of God perfectly on the sinner’s behalf and in paying the penalty of sin to which we were all exposed. We distinguish, then, between the *ground* on which God’s statement of justification can be made on the one hand, and the *act* of justification on the other. The *ground* of justification is the completed substitutionary work of Christ. The *act* of justification follows God’s response in time to the individual’s exercise of faith and trust in Christ. It is, of course, true that there are aspects of the believer’s realization of his eternal state that necessarily follow justification and sanctification. For the reality of eternal life expands its meaning to the state that will exist and be experienced in the life that is to come. But what is at issue at this point is that when, and because, the conditions necessary to justification and sanctification have been met (the work of Christ has fulfilled the conditions specified in the covenant of grace and the regenerating grace of God has conveyed the gift of faith to the soul) then at that point and at that time the believer is an indefectible partaker of eternal life.

But now that we have brought to further focus what is involved in justification and its relation to the state of sanctification, an important aspect of the divine action in justification should be observed. It is clearly stated in the Scriptures that “Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom 5:6), and that in doing so he bore the penalty of the guilt of those for whom he died (2 Cor 5:21). But the question arises: How could God the Father, in all justice, and remaining true to his eternal righteousness, punish in Christ the sins of others when the penalty must properly be borne only by those who were guilty. God who is

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<sup>20</sup> John Murray, *Collected Writings*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), vol. 2, 198.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 115, italics added.

himself truthful and eternally righteous could not lay the punishment for sin on his Son unless his Son was actually guilty. What, then, was to be done? In order to be able truthfully to *declare* his Son guilty and therefore liable to punishment, and for God to remain true to his own righteousness, it was necessary that God should first *constitute* his Son guilty. That is precisely what was done. God *constituted* Christ guilty by imputing to him the guilt of those for whom he was about to die. Christ was not constituted a sinner. He was constituted guilty of sin, not of any sin of his own, for he was sinless, but guilty by transference to him of the sin of the people for whom he died. Because he had been constituted guilty, God could rightly and justly lay the punishment of sin on him. By the same token, God could not truthfully *declare* any persons to be righteous who were not, in fact, righteous. The truthfulness of God again intervened in the transaction. In order, therefore, to be able truthfully to *declare* certain individuals righteous, it was necessary that God should first *constitute* them as righteous. Again, that is precisely what was done. God *constituted* those people righteous by imputing to them the forensic righteousness of Christ. By that reciprocal transaction the justice of God remained unimpaired. God was therefore "Just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus" (Rom 3:26).

On this highly important matter of constitutive righteousness, Murray has written insightfully: "Justification is both a declarative and a constitutive act of God's free grace. It is constitutive in order that it may be truly declarative. God must constitute the relationship as well as declare it to be. The constitutive act consists in the imputation to us of the obedience and righteousness of Christ."<sup>22</sup> Acknowledging that the truthfulness and righteousness of God are involved at that point, Turretin has stated in that connection: "God cannot show favor to, nor justify anyone without a perfect righteousness. For since the judgment of God is according to truth, he cannot pronounce anyone just who is not really just. . . . By the righteousness and obedience of one, Christ, we are constituted righteous. . . . Justification takes place on account of the suretyship of Christ and the payment made for us by him."<sup>23</sup>

When the purely forensic nature and meaning of justification are thus exposed, it is to be observed that God's action of justification does not make a person holy. Holiness is not involved at that point. But if it is not justification that makes a person holy, what does? The answer turns on the reality and meaning of God's conveyance to the sinner of the sovereign grace of regeneration. It is by regeneration that one is made holy, and that grace having done its work in the soul of an individual, he turns to Christ in saving faith in the manner we have seen. There is then an important sense in which holiness is prior to justification. By that we mean that a person is holy in the sense in which, having been the beneficiary of a new creating work of the Holy Spirit, he is set apart for God in a

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<sup>22</sup> See Murray, *Redemption – Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 154: See also Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), vol. 1, 203–206.

<sup>23</sup> Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology, Volume 2*. Translated by George Musgrave Giger. Edited by James T. Dennison (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1994), 647, 651, 653.

completely new relationship. By the secret work of the Spirit of God in regeneration, a being "born again," as Christ referred to it in his nocturnal conversation with Nicodemus (John 3:3), a sinner is thereby "delivered from the power of darkness, and translated into the kingdom of [God's] dear Son" (See Col 1:13). That work of regeneration constitutes the individual as holy, not only in the positional sense that he is now set apart for God, but in the sense also that the Holy Spirit's work of sanctification in the life of the individual has thereby begun. That is because the faculties of soul have been endowed with new abilities and capacities in the manner we have seen, and a new *habitus* or disposition or principle of action has been divinely implanted in the soul. What comes to view, as a result, is that, first, by regeneration one is made holy and his sanctification has begun; and secondly, by justification his status in relation to the law of God is radically changed to what it ought to be. In holiness and righteousness, then, the newborn person freely sets out on a life that is pleasing to God. Now and henceforth the Holy Spirit will so work in the life of the individual as to further his growth in holiness, or, as we shall see, his progressive sanctification.

Justification and sanctification, then, both involve declarative statements of God. We have already noted the once-for-all forensic statement of God that amounts to the repentant sinner's justification. Against that declarative statement, the sinner enters into a new experiential state, the state of *being* justified. "Therefore being justified [Greek: *Dikaiwqe/ntej*, 'having been justified'] by faith, we have peace with God" (Rom 5:1). We should see also that it is at the point of regeneration that the individual to whom that grace is communicated is thereby definitively and once-for-all transferred from the kingdom of Satan to the kingdom of God. At that point his transference from wrath to grace definitively occurs. God has thereby "delivered us from the power of darkness, and translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son" (Col 1:13). There is a once-for-allness about God's statements of justification, adoption into his family, and transference from the one kingdom to the other. The point to be grasped is that at the moment of regeneration sanctification has begun. Because that is so, we agree with John Murray's statements regarding what he refers to at that point as "definitive sanctification."<sup>24</sup> The new state of holiness in which the beneficiary of grace now stands is what is referred to as the individual's definitive sanctification. He is now holy in the sight of God.

Beyond that divine statement of definitive sanctification, however, is the progressive work of the Spirit in the life of the believer that amounts to what we have observed as his *progressive* sanctification. The redemptive work of God comes to consummation in the life of the individual by his deliverance from the guilt, the power, and the pollution of sin. The deliverance from guilt we have inspected under the heading of the justifying act of God, in the reciprocal imputation of the sinner's guilt to Christ and the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the sinner. But it remains to be said that sin, that is actions of sin

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<sup>24</sup> See Murray, "Definitive Sanctification" in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 4 vols, 1976–82), vol. 2, 277.

and even a principle of sin that wars against the soul, clings to the individual throughout his life in this world. It is the office of the Holy Spirit, then, to bring his divine influence to bear on the consciousness and life of the individual in such a way that the power of sin is progressively destroyed and the soul progressively cleansed from the pollution of sin. That work of God in the soul takes up what is referred to as progressive sanctification, to which definitive sanctification is the necessary antecedent.<sup>25</sup>

Only two observations need to be made in relation to certain claims by contemporary theologians that run counter to what we have now said. First, it is in no sense true to say that justification awaits a forensic decision of God at the last day when, at the resurrection, we stand in judgment. Given what we have seen as the once-for-allness of God's forensic declarative statements to the repentant sinner, the individual person enters thereby into a *state* of justification that cannot be reversed. In the day of glory that individual will be more sanctified, but not more justified. Second, we recall our claim, which can be well understood on the basis of Scriptural data, that at regeneration the individual is joined to Christ. The doctrine of the believer's union with Christ has been the subject of dispute and of erroneous statements and conclusions in the recent New Perspective on Paul and the Federal Vision theologies. I have addressed those issues in other places.<sup>26</sup>

But it is to be held, as we have already said, that our union with Christ is indissoluble. It is in that last mentioned fact that the confessional statement with which we began reaches its high and triumphant conclusion. It is "by virtue of the covenant of grace" that we have "eternal life." For it is an irrefutable datum of the Scriptures that, as our Lord himself prayed on our behalf, "This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (John 17:3). And we know God because we have heard his voice speaking to us in the Scriptures and in our Spirit-awakened consciences. And we have cast our state at the feet of Christ who, we now know, died in our place that we might be reconciled to God. We praise God for his spoken and clear Word, and for the salvation he has provided in his Son for all those who believe. May we yet learn to live in the light of the great things that God has done in redeeming us unto himself at so great a price.

### **A concluding observation**

A concluding observation is in order. We have looked carefully at the doctrinal content and significance of the remarkable confessional statement with which we began. By reason of the covenant of grace, sinners are brought to a condition of "accepting,

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<sup>25</sup> See Murray, *Collected Writings*, vol. 2, 294 on "Progressive Sanctification."

<sup>26</sup> See my *When God Converts a Sinner* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), chapter 7, and my *The Immediacy of God* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 141 for a response to some recent claims of Michael Horton in his *Covenant and Salvation: Union with Christ* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).

receiving, and resting on Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life." It may very well be that at a conference such as this we face a temptation to rest with some satisfaction in what we have worked out on that important and necessary doctrinal level. The danger exists that we might take satisfaction in what becomes, then, a mere or sheer intellectualism, or a fascination with a Reformed doctrinal scholasticism. It would be a pity if this conference fell subject to such a temptation. For our interest in doctrine and exegesis must never become a merely theoretical or academic interest. The objectives we have in view are quite different, and they must be reckoned to be different.

Let us hold to two implications of our work together, without which we finally fail: first, let us see what a firm grasp of our doctrines implies for the daily and continuing life in Christ Jesus to which, by the grace of God, we have been admitted; and second, let us be sure that our preaching and teaching of the word of life as we have found it to be revealed to us finds genuine application, both evangelistic and pastoral, as we follow out the high privileges and responsibilities to which we have been called. Only then, in a balanced and well-rounded view of our doctrines and of their meaning and implications, will we have begun to honor the truths of which, by the sovereign grace of God, we are now the firm possessors.