

What is the Gospel Promise?

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The twentieth chapter of the *Savoy Declaration of Faith* observes that “God was pleased to give unto the elect the promise of Christ . . . and salvation by him.”¹ The *Savoy* thereby declares that its reasoning is christocentric in the highest degree, and in doing so it anchors its conception of the gospel and its promise in what it had previously exposed as the theocentric orientation of its doctrinal statements. For at this critical stage it has linked the substance of the gospel promise to the felicity and beatitude of “the elect.” The implicit conjunction of doctrines at that point harks back, for the establishment of its perspective, to the earlier chapters of the *Savoy* that addressed “God’s eternal decrees” (chapter 3), “God’s covenant with man” (chapter 7), and, following the rehearsal of the fall of man, sin, and its punishment, the way and process of redemption and the blessings of the Christian believer’s regenerate life.

But the scriptural integrity of the *Savoy* at those points does itself force a twofold question: First, what are we to understand as the full intent of the “promise” that God has graciously held out to us in the gospel; and second, to what extent has the church in its long history, and notably in the present time, incorporated the highest reaches of that promise in its statement of the evangel? In the present space I shall address the first question briefly and conclude with a suggestion regarding the relation of what is said to the church’s contemporary evangelicalism.

In its twentieth chapter the *Savoy* recognizes that the realization and appropriation

¹ Robert E. Davis, ed., *The Savoy Declaration of Faith* (Millers Falls, MA: The First Congregational Church, 1998), 56.

by an individual of the gospel promise necessitates “an effectual, irresistible work of the Holy Ghost upon the whole soul, for the producing in them a new spiritual life.”² The important conception at that point of the “whole soul,” and with, by implication, the active engagement of all of the faculties of the soul, intellect, emotions, and will, will engage us again in what follows. But the pneumatic influence that is there referred to is to be traced to the realization of higher reaches of the gospel promise’s fulfillment, as the *Savoy* acknowledges in other places.³ Those higher reaches involve more than the entry into eternal life. Involved, in short, is the conception and realization of what, as it follows from what the *Savoy* has just stated as “new spiritual life,” is to be understood as the Christian’s highest good. It is that with which a fuller conception of the gospel promise is concerned, or what we referred to in our question as to what is to be understood as the full intent of the “promise” that God has graciously held out to us in the gospel.

To address what is involved in our focus on “the Christian’s highest good” we recall the extensive treatment of precisely that question in the First Epistle of John.⁴ For our present purposes two principal questions will occupy our discussion. First, what is to be understood, as a result of the redemption that Christ accomplished, as that fulfills the gospel promise, and is summarized as the Christian’s highest good; and second, how is that reflected in the identity of, and as a result is to be reflected in the actual life and behavior of, the confessing Christian?

What has just been said implies that when we refer to the Christian’s highest good we do not have in view what we may refer to as the ultimate *summum bonum*, or the

² *Ibid.*, 57.

³ See *Savoy*, chapters 12, “Of Adoption,” and 13, “Of Sanctification,” in Davis, *op. cit.*, 45–46.

⁴ The argument that follows is substantially dependent on my forthcoming *The Christian’s Highest Good*, chapter 4.

highest good as that will be realized when, in the day of our Lord's appearing, the Christian sees God as he is in his glorified Son. We shall see him in his glorified human nature, as he had prayed to the Father on the night on which he was betrayed: "And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self, with the glory which I had with thee before the world was" (John 17:5). But we are concerned now with the Christian's highest good as that is realizable in this present life. In one respect, that highest good, as it is presently the Christian's possession, is to *know God*. "This is life eternal," John had said in his gospel, "that they might *know thee*, the only true God" (John 17:3). Highly significant though the Christian's knowledge of God is, and while it is the distinguishing reality that separates the Christian from all other people, much more is involved. And it was to address that "much more" in a consistent and extended manner that the apostle John wrote his First Epistle. That highest good is identified in the words of John as "fellowship with the Father." "Truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3). But, we now ask, what does that fellowship mean and imply and confer on the Christian as he works his way through the uncertain pilgrimage in this world? It will provide perspective for what follows to observe the way in which the apostle John unfolds the argument of his epistle, as he maintains his initial proposition and examines its implications.

What lies before us in more detail can be summarized in three questions: First, who is it with whom the fellowship of which we are speaking is possible? Second, what are the grounds on which that fellowship has become possible? And third, what is to be said of the character of those who are the beneficiaries of that high privilege of fellowship?

The holiness of God

At the end of a long life of pastoral ministry John sets out for his readers what he wishes them to understand as the essence of the gospel as he had received that from the Lord himself, and what, in the light of that, they should embrace and cultivate as the highest blessings and privileges accorded them as Christian people. The syntactical structure of the first verse of John's letter is expressive. He begins with the words: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard . . ." It appears that John is about to set out what it was that he had heard. But he digresses in order to speak of "the Word of life," the Lord Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Godhead who had come in the flesh, and with whom he and the other disciples had traveled and from whom they had learned. In that important and, in the context of John's letter, necessary digression, he placed before his readers the Person of Christ in both his *essential* or eternal identity and his *incarnate* or *official* or *redemptive identity* to which we shall return in a moment.

But after his digression John returns to his "That which we have heard" in the third verse of his first chapter, and in the fifth verse he lays out his answer to our first question. "This then is the message which we have heard of him" (1 John 1:5). "God," he says, "is light." The basic datum, which provides the ground for all of the reasoning that will follow in his letter, is that God is a holy God. That is the issue in brief. God is light. God is holy, and in him is no darkness. But John's conception is at that point widened. He makes it clear that the "fellowship with the Father," that provides the frame within which all that he will go on to say is to be read and understood, carries with it "fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3).

That latter statement is pregnant with meaning. It is not being said simply that there exists in some sense the possibility of fellowship with the Father and also with the Son on separate and differing levels. There are clearly respects in which that is true. But at this initial stage of his letter John is saying something different. The fellowship of which he speaks, the significance and potential of which he will go on to elaborate, is with the Father and the Son together. That is clarified in the very last words of his letter, where he appeals to the Christian believer's union with the Father and the Son together as grounding all he has said to that point. He had spoken there of the fact that "We know that we are of God" (1 John 5:19), and from that, as John argued, the profound result has followed that "we are in him" (1 John 5:20). The profound statement is that the Christian believer is "in God," as John's context states. The thought is ineffable; it is difficult to express its meaning in language that is at our command as finite persons; its truth lies on a level of fact and comprehension that only the Christian can begin to grasp. The hymn writer grasped something of its reality and significance when he said: "None but his loved ones know."⁵

But the reality is pressed on the Christian mind. The status to which the Christian believer has been raised by the regenerating grace of God implies nothing less than that. The Christian believer is now "in God." Then the explanation follows in the same verse: The Christian is "in his Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 5:20). The issue is that because of the Christian's union with Christ he has, at the same time and because of his union with the Son, union with the Father. Union with Christ, moreover, carries with it union with the three Persons of the Godhead. John's doctrine points clearly to the fact and the truth of

⁵ The reference is to an eleventh-century Latin hymn translated by Edward Caswell in 1849, in *Trinity Hymnal* (Atlanta: Great Commission Publications, Revised edition, 1990), 645.

the consubstantiality of the divine Persons, and it is therefore with them together that the fellowship of which John is speaking exists and transmits to the Christian the benefits that John goes on to display.

We have, as it were, “bookend” statements at the beginning and the end of John’s letter. At the third verse of the first chapter he states his basic and orientating conception of fellowship with the Father and the Son. Then in the closing verses of the letter he returns for a final time to his principal theme. The fellowship is with the Father and the Son. The Christian is “in God,” and he is “in the Son” (1 John 5:19–20). John will work out the details and the implications of that remarkable truth which, now in his closing days, has taken up the passion of his soul.

When John refers to “the Word of life” (1 John 1:1) we hear the echo of the prologue to his gospel. The Second Person of the Godhead is the “Word,” as he was “the Word” at the very beginning of the creation when God spoke into existence all that exists external to the Godhead. “He [‘the Word’] was God [and] was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him” (John 1:1–3). And “by him were all things created” (Col 1:16). The Second Person of the Godhead came into the world to “declare” God unto us. “No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him” (John 1:18). God has spoken by and through his Son. He has had no dealings with the human race except through his Son and the Holy Spirit whom his Son has sent to speak of him. Now in the opening statement of his letter John places before his readers that eternal or *essential* identity of the Son, and he immediately follows that by the statement that he was “manifested” to John and the disciples in ways that he indicates. At this point John emphasizes that the same Second Person of the

Godhead actually came into the world, and in human nature walked and taught and revealed God and, in a manner that John will explain, provided redemption for his people through his substitutionary life and death. That, we shall see, takes up the reality of our Lord's incarnation, his presence in the world. We have referred in other places to the miracles involved in our Lord's incarnation; the miracle of the breaking of the entailment of sin that was involved in the preparation of the virgin's womb, and that of the Holy Spirit's impregnation and fertilization of the sanctified egg of the virgin.

The crux of John's epistle, and the coordinating motif of all of the argument and doctrinal analysis he sets forth in it, is found in his repeated claim that the Christian's highest good exists in the privilege of fellowship with the Father. That, in the sense in which we are now investigating it, is the highest reach of the promise of the gospel. In verse 5 of his first chapter John begins his fuller statement of the gospel in which that privilege and the benefits it conveys are stated. His statement is a remarkable portrayal of the essential terms of the gospel and the priorities implicit in it. The first statement of the gospel is, as John says, that "God is light." God is a holy God. But it is important to grasp the apostle's more complete claim at that point. The gospel is, of course, addressed to man in his miserable and lost state in sin. But we are told here that the first statement of the gospel, and what must therefore always be the first statement in the preaching of the gospel, is not a statement about man. The first statement is a statement about God, and a reminder that we and the whole world have to do with a holy God. We note here also that the first statement of the gospel is not about man's state in sin, or about Adam's fall that caused that estate. Nor is it a statement about the provision for redemption from sin that God has made. Those things are all, of course, critically important parts of the

gospel, and they will follow later. But they must not be placed up front. They have no meaning and cannot be understood for what they are unless the first statement has been made perfectly clear. The first statement is that God is light and that he lives in light, and only then does John differentiate between the light in which God exists and the darkness that is man's natural state. And then only after that does he come in verse 7 to the fact that "the blood of Jesus Christ" has been set forth as a cleansing from sin. That order of statement is imperative.

But we must press the question, incomplete and insufficient though our answers will necessarily be. What is involved in the fellowship with the eternally holy God that is stated to us as the Christian's highest good? By virtue of the completed redemptive work of Christ we have access to the very presence of the Father. It was for precisely that reason and for that objective that the Father sent his Son into the world. We recall that before Adam fell into sin his fellowship with God was one of closest intimacy. God "walked with Adam in the garden in the cool of the day" (Gen 3:8). In that close communion God revealed to Adam the scope and purposes of the divine will in creation, he gave to Adam the laws and mandates by which he should live in order to please God, and he made clear to Adam the conditions on which, in his perseverance in obedience to God, he would inherit eternal life. By obedience, Adam would be confirmed in moral state and raised to eternal life and impeccability. Adam then, in the state of intrinsic holiness in which he had been created, knew and conversed with God in and with a naturalness that since his fall had been closed to all his posterity in their natural state. But now the Christian believer has been raised, not simply to the state from which Adam fell, but to the much higher state of indissoluble union with the three Persons of the Godhead.

It follows that there has again been opened to the Christian the privilege of close communion with the Father, even beyond the level of privilege that Adam enjoyed.

The eternal Father is now father to the son, the Christian believer whom he has called and whom he has reconciled to himself. Now the son, the new-born child of God, can come to the throne of the Father and converse with him in closest intimacy. There is again a likeness of mind between the Father and the son, the child whom he has redeemed. The apostle Paul has summed up the state of relationship by saying that now “we have the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16). The Christian has begun to see all things as God in Christ himself sees them, the being and glory of God, the meaning of sin, the Personhood of Christ who came to declare and represent the Father, and the meaning of redemption and reconciliation with God. We are careful to say that the Christian has *begun* to see all these things with, as it has been given to him, the mind of Christ. The process of the Christian’s learning will continue to and beyond the end of his life-journey in this world. Eternity will not exhaust what is to be known of the glory to which the Christian has been introduced.

Fellowship with the Father means and implies that the Christian, who comes into the presence of the Father clothed with “the robe of righteousness” of Christ (Isa 61:10), can speak to the Father, and listen to the Father speaking to him, of the most intimate issues and cares of life. A perfect openness now exists between them. We are not speaking here of a mere non-rational mysticism. Admitted to the innermost holy place of the Father’s presence, the Christian comes with all the faculties of human soul engaged. The Christian’s communion with God is an intelligent communion. It is a communion grounded in a love for God that is breathed from the knowledge of reconciliation and sins

forgiven. It is a communion that is free of inhibition because the volition that it exercises has itself been renewed and strengthened by the renewing, regenerating grace of God..

In fellowship with the Father, the Christians hears the Father speak again the words that he has already inscripturated in the Word that he has given. In hearing the Father speak those same words, and waiting as the Spirit of God by whom the Father speaks illumines the soul with recurring new levels of comprehension, the Christian relishes not only the comfort and safety of the Father's presence, but the calming peace of assurance of his heavenly Father's pleasure.

In the moments of communion with God that the Christian's status of fellowship with the Father permits, he knows something more of the meaning of "the love of God shed abroad in our hearts" (Rom 5:5). The Christian comes to the Father without cluttered inhibition, but with a reverence born of godly fear and worshipful praise and adoration. Admitted to the intimacies of fellowship, aspects of the mind and heart of God are disclosed to the Christian again, and the realization of the meaning of the Father's declaration is born afresh: "I have loved thee with an everlasting love; therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee" (Jer 31:3). But indeed, "great is the mystery of godliness" (1 Tim 3:16), and we pause to be reminded that it is by reason of our union with Christ, the eternal Son of God who came to reconcile us to the Father, that we have union with the three Persons of the Godhead. Our fellowship with the Father, grounded as it is in that realization, takes up the mediation and intercession for us of the eternal Son who is now discharging his heavenly high priestly office and function, and the impress on our souls of the Holy Spirit's mediation to us of the Father's highest blessings and his will for us.

Fellowship with the Father has, as a result, very practical implications. The Christian, as he hears the Father speak in ways in which he has already spoken through his Word, sees and understands again how he should live. The mandates and the will of God become clearer. The Christian thereby acquires new insights, new confirmations of the directions he should take, confirming convictions of God-glorifying courses in life, and the “peace that passes understanding” (Phil 4:7) that comes with the assurance that he lives within the will of his Father.

What is to be said more expansively of fellowship with the Father becomes clear to the Christian experientially as he comes to the Father in faith and true worship. He knows, with gradual and opening wideness, the meaning of his Father’s love and purposes for him. He knows more clearly the “joy unspeakable and full of glory” (1 Pet 1:8) that comes from knowing God in his Son Jesus Christ. He knows, with a calmness born of worshipful communion with the Father, what at last is meant by the remarkable redemption and reconciliation with himself that God has provided. In such ways, the experience of fellowship with God teaches its own innermost meaning.

The benefits of the Christian’s fellowship with the Father include its transforming effects. The relationship has a transforming effect in that it enables the believer to say with Paul in his letter to the Galatians, “I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20). It is transforming in that God has made the Christian a “partaker of the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4). By that it is meant, not that the Christian is absorbed into the essence of God. Christian regeneration does not involve the divinization of man. But the Christian is made a partaker of the divine nature in that the

Holy Spirit endows him progressively with the communicable attributes of God. He does that to the extent and in the degree that the Christian believer is being prepared for the place he has been ordained to occupy in the eternal kingdom of glory.

The Christian knows with unsullied assurance, on the grounds of his fellowship with God, that his heavenly Father knows all about him and waits to hear his worship and praise and to hear his needs and petitions. He knows that his Father is his sure retreat in every storm, a rescue from the gales and cares of his life. But more than that, the Christian knows by virtue of his innermost conviction and awareness of it, that his Father has declared his love for him, an everlasting love, born of divine will from all eternity, that will never fail nor change. The Christian knows, with an assurance that the gates of hell cannot destroy though they may attempt to shake it, that the Father has again and again given to him the testimony of the Holy Spirit that he is, in truth, a child of his heavenly Father, destined to eternal joy in his very presence.

The ground of fellowship with the Father

What is it, then, in which fellowship with the Father, or, indeed, the very possibility of that fellowship, is grounded? At this point we hear again the twentieth chapter of the *Savoy Declaration*. John gives us the answer in the seventh verse of his first chapter. It is the fact that “the blood of Jesus Christ his [God’s] Son cleanseth us from all sin.” Now it is useful at this point to observe two respects in which it is possible to misread the apostle’s intention at that important point.

First, John has raised in the preceding verses the distinction between two classes of people, the understanding of which is to be held carefully as John’s epistle proceeds.

One class of people “walk in the light” as God is in the light, and the other class continue to “walk in darkness.” That dichotomy, or that division between two clearly definable classes of people, comes into focus repeatedly throughout John’s epistle. Every individual is in one class or the other. With that in view, John then says that “if we walk in the light, as he [God] is in the light, we have fellowship one with another” (1 John 1:7). Now that “one with another” is not to be taken to refer to the fellowship that does, or should, exist between fellow members of the church, though John will insist at later points of his letter on the importance of a fellowship of mutual love among the saints of God. At this beginning point of his letter the reference is to the fellowship that exists between God the Father and the Christian person. The “one with another” refers to the Christian and his heavenly Father.

The second possible misreading of this seventh verse of John’s first chapter takes us to the heart and essence of his principal concern and thesis. Let us put the point negatively. The verse does not have reference to the quality or consistency of the Christian’s walk in this life. The text is that “if we walk in the light . . . we have fellowship.” It might appear on the surface of things that John is making a statement there about the condition on the grounds of which we have fellowship with the Father; in the sense that if we walk in the light we have fellowship, and if, for some reason, we cease to walk in the light we do not have fellowship. If that were the sense of the verse it would be speaking to the quality of the Christian’s walk in the faith that he professes. But the apostle’s statement is to be understood on a very different level. To see what is involved, we must refer again to the underlying statement in the verse that “the blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from all sin.”

John is not addressing at this point the fact that if and when we sin in our Christian walk, the blood of Christ cleanses us. It can be seen later in his first chapter the important sense in which, of course, that cleansing does occur. If that was in view at this initial point, however, this opening statement of John would have to be seen as having reference to what occurs in the life of the Christian believer in the progress of his sanctification. But for reasons of the manner in which this epistle of John is structured, the reference to the blood of Jesus Christ here in verse 7 has reference, not to the Christian's sanctification, but to his justification. John will address what is, in effect, the question of the Christian's progress in sanctification in subsequent verses in his first chapter.

The epistle's concern at this initial point with the "blood of Jesus Christ" as providing the ground of the Christian's justification is to be recognized in a very important sense. For when John introduced his letter by stating, as we have seen, that the Christian's highest good is fellowship with the Father, it was necessary to state, beyond that, what it is on which that fellowship is grounded. And he is saying at this point that the fellowship is grounded in the fact of the redemptive work of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is that substitutionary life and death of Christ who, we saw at the beginning of the epistle, was "manifested" to us, that provides the grounding of the very possibility of fellowship with God. Again, it is because God has set forth in his Son a propitiation for sin, as John will address that later in his letter beginning with the second chapter, that the possibility of fellowship with God and with his Son Jesus Christ exists.

The first two of our questions have been answered by the apostle: first, it is with God who is light, who is "in the light" (1 John 1:7), and who is the holy eternal God, with

whom the fellowship of which we are speaking exists; second, the ground on which that fellowship has become possible is “the blood of Jesus Christ.” We pause at this point to observe what is to be understood more precisely by what John has referred to as “the blood of Jesus Christ.” The term clearly refers to, and takes up in its meaning, the full scope of the atonement that Christ offered for sin. When Christ died in his human nature he suffered in human soul and body. In agony of soul he passed through the pains of eternal hell and *eternal death*, and after returning triumphantly from that suffering of soul he laid down his life in *temporal death*, having committed his human soul to the Father. “The blood of Jesus Christ” in John’s formula here is, then, an abbreviated reference to all that our Lord suffered, the incomprehensible extent of which provides the ground of our reconciliation with the Father. As the apostle Paul made the point in his letter to the Ephesians, it is “Through him [Christ] we have access by one Spirit unto the Father” (Eph 2:18).

Two classes of people

The Christian’s highest good, as the blessing of it accrues to him in this life, is fellowship with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We have looked at that from several perspectives and considered the ground of it in the substitutionary death of Christ. We can now look more closely at several further implications of that highest good as John continues to address it in his First Epistle.

First, it must now be seen, as it applies to all that is to be said about the Christian status and life, that there are only two classes of people in the world. There are the regenerate on the one hand and the unregenerate on the other. Abraham Kuyper, a

prominent theologian-statesman in the Netherlands in the late nineteenth century, has made the point in a particularly interesting way. He speaks at length of what he refers to as “Two Kinds of People,” explaining the respects in which God’s work of regeneration in the soul establishes the difference between them. Kuyper refers repeatedly to what he means by the word “palingenesis,” the transliteration of the underlying Greek word meaning regeneration, or being born again. “We speak none too emphatically, therefore,” Kuyper observes, “when we speak of two kinds of people. Both are human, but one is inwardly different from the other, and consequently feels a different content rising from his consciousness; thus they face the cosmos from different points of view, and are impelled by different impulses.” In an apologetic essay whose detail cannot detain us at this point, Kuyper observes further that because of the differentiation he has already established there are “Two Kinds of Science.”⁶

But the doctrinal concept on which Kuyper has insisted is substantiated by the scriptural data that guides our discussion. The apostle Paul, in the context of his detailed scrutiny of the character of the natural man in sin, has made the point in the first chapter of his letter to the Romans. There are, he says, covenant-keepers and there are covenant-breakers (Rom 1:31). That casts our minds back to the original status in which man was established as he came from the hands of his Creator, as the *Savoy* has clearly stated it. Man, in short, is a covenant creature. And notwithstanding our first parent’s fall and his repudiation of his obligations under the covenant of creation (also referred to as the covenant of works or the covenant of life), all those descending from him by ordinary generation, all of his natural posterity, remain under obligation to the requirements of that original covenant. That relationship derives from the fact that Adam was established by

⁶ Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 152–55.

his Creator as the federal head and representative of all who would by natural means descend from him. Adam was thus a public person.

That highly significant distinction between classes of people is stated in John's first epistle in a particularly informative way. In making that twofold classification, John identifies the respective members of the classes as follows. On the one hand, he says, there are those who "walk in the light," and there are others who "walk in darkness." That dichotomy is basic and fundamental to everything that is to be said of the Christian from that point on. As to the identification of those in the first class, those who "walk in the light," their status depends entirely on the grace of God who, by the regenerating work of his Holy Spirit within them, has brought them to see the reconciliation with him that Christ has provided. They are his elect people. They are the ones who are "called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28).

Those persons who are now identified as the ones who "walk in the light" are who and what they are because, as Paul again states it in his letter to the Colossians, they have been "delivered from the power of darkness and translated into the kingdom of his [God's] dear Son" (Col 1:13). A definitive transference has taken place. Once, those people were "ungodly," because they had not kept the law of God. But now they have been regarded as "godly," by reason of the imputation to them of the righteousness of Christ who kept the law on their behalf. They have turned from their idols to Christ (1Thess 1:9), in conscious and whole-souled exercise of the saving faith that was conveyed to them by the Spirit of God. That being given, when John now refers to those who "walk in the light" he is not, in the first place, making any reference to the quality of that walk, or the quality of the Christian life that one may or may not exhibit. On the

contrary, if we are to grasp the meaning of the Christian's highest good at this critical point, we have to see that John is speaking not of the quality of life but of a designated status in which the Christian person stands and exists. He is speaking, that is, about a particular class of people, and he will go on to speak at length of what characterizes them by virtue of their being "in the light." The most essential way to refer to or describe them is by that fundamental designation. Unlike other people, they are no longer "in the darkness."

John goes on to make a profoundly true statement that influences again the structure of his letter from that point on. In the sixth verse of his first chapter he makes a very pointed reference to those who, unlike the persons we have just described, are still "walking in darkness." As he will explicitly refer to some of them again in the nineteenth verse of his second chapter, there are some who, while they are still numbered among those who "walk in darkness," nevertheless make the false claim that they do, in fact, have "fellowship with God." "No," John says vehemently. If such people make that kind of claim, their claim is demonstrably false, and they "lie, and do not the truth" (1 John 1:6). Only the first class of people can say that they possess that highest good of fellowship with God. The false claims of the rest identify them as liars. John's language is abrupt and severe.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones has grasped the distinction we have now made, and he has remarked at length on its importance for understanding the Christian's true status. "When we come to this verse about 'walking in the light', we interpret it as just the antithesis and the exact opposite of 'walking in darkness'. . . . It mean[s] that I claim that I belong to a different realm, to the kingdom of light and to the kingdom of God. In that kingdom, alas,

I may be most unworthy; but though unworthy, I am in it and I belong to it and I am walking in the realm of light. . . . Every Christian of necessity is one who is walking in the light. The non-Christian is the one who is walking in darkness”⁷

The second thing to be said about the highest good of the Christian is that the fellowship about which John is speaking is not something the Christian believer is to work towards and finally reach and realize, as though it was some higher aspect of Christian character and privilege that may, after sufficient endeavor and struggle, come into one’s grasp and enjoyment. To the contrary, fellowship with the Father is the high privilege and status of every now-born Christian by reason of the very fact that he is a Christian. For what establishes that new status is the fact that such a person has been made regenerate by the grace of God, and now, by reason that he thereby is made a son of God, born with a nature that reflects that of his heavenly Father, a son of God by birth, all of the privileges consequent on his new status belong to him. They belong to him by God’s redemptive design and eternal decree. They are his immediately, and it is open to him to enjoy them to the full as his walk with Christ proceeds and matures.

We shall go on to see that a vastly important distinction is to be drawn between the Christian’s new status and privileges as such and the extent to which certain other aspects of the Christian life call for examination. Two other things are to be said. First, the extent to which the new-born Christian is aware of the status of fellowship that now belongs to him, and the degree to which he particularizes it in his experience, will necessarily vary. Second, the extent to which, in his actual walk in the Christian life, he cultivates and lives consistently with the status of privilege that is actually his will also

⁷ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Fellowship with God: Life in Christ, Volume one, Studies in 1 John* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1993), 127–28.

vary. It is important, at many stages of Christian doctrine, to distinguish the *objective facts* of the blessings that God has reserved for, and granted to, his people from their *subjective realization* and enjoyment of those blessings. The possible confusion by the Christian on that important difference is undoubtedly the cause of weakness and ineffectiveness in the Christian life.

On such grounds it is true also that by reason of the imperfect development in holiness of the faculties of soul, sin inevitably continues in the experiential Christian life. That is true, even though when the Christian falls into occasions of sin he is no longer under the dominion of sin. For his existential status has been dramatically changed. The apostle Paul has stated it clearly in his letter to the Romans: “Our old man is crucified with Christ, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. . . . Reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. . . . Sin shall not have dominion over you” (Rom 6:6, 11, 14).

The high status, then, of fellowship with God is the property of every Christian, it is his at the very beginning of his Christian life and experience, and by reason of its grounding in the redemptive design of God it is indestructible, indissoluble.

The Christian’s sin

The Christian person no longer lives in the realm of darkness. He is no longer “walking in darkness.” The transformation of life and status due to the renewing grace of God has taken place. He is now “walking in the light.” But an important distinction remains to be drawn between that new existential status as such and the experiential life of the Christian in the world. In short, we must realize the all too serious danger, and we must take

account of the all too clear reality, of sin in the life of the Christian. Though he is now a truly regenerate person, and though he has been raised to the new high status of union with Christ and fellowship with the triune Persons of the Godhead, nevertheless he sins.

As we consider now the apostle's discussion of the life of such a person, we are speaking of sin in the life of those who are in fellowship with God. We observe two things about them: First, the fact of their sin does not mean that they are no longer "walking in the light." If that statement in itself appears to contain a contradiction, that arises, we have to say, from a serious failure to grasp adequately what the apostle is teaching in his epistle and what is the substance of the apostolic doctrine as we have already observed it at these points. Lloyd-Jones has observed on that important point in drawing our attention again to the very definition and existential status of the Christian. "The Christian is not a man or woman who ought to be walking in the light but who so often is walking in darkness. The Christian is one who, by definition here, is always walking in the light even though he falls into sin. By falling into sin you do not return to walking in darkness. The Christian is not a Christian at all unless he is walking in the light. . . . Christians do not spend their lives walking in and out of the kingdom of God; we are all by nature in the kingdom of darkness, and by becoming Christians we are translated, put into, the kingdom of God. . . . It is a daring statement in a sense, yet it is scriptural: if I fall into sin I am still in the kingdom of God. I am not walking in darkness because I have sinned; I am still in the realm of light."⁸ The meaning of what is said is that two distinct and separate realms exist. One is the realm of light, and the other is the realm of darkness. The Christian is a person who has been definitively transformed from the latter to the former. Whatever is to be said of him from that point on is to be said of a

⁸ Ibid., 142.

person who is for ever in the realm of light. That means that he is one who is “walking in the light.”

We can make the point in a different way. We have seen that the Christian’s highest good is fellowship with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. When the Christian sins, that does not mean that his fellowship with God has been destroyed. Sin tarnishes that fellowship and it grieves the Holy Spirit who ministers the grace of God to us as we walk in the Christian life, but on confession of sin God will cleanse the one who is his child of all unrighteousness.

Second, the relation we have just acknowledged can be examined further in the light of what is to be said of Christian personhood. The person who has been made regenerate by the Holy Spirit’s work within the soul is now a new man, “the old man has been crucified with Christ” (Rom 6:6), and “old things are passed away, all things are become new” (2 Cor 5:17). That newness of personhood involves the fact that there is not now in the regenerate person both an old nature and a new nature. There is abroad in the evangelical church, and even in evangelical scholarship at the present time, misunderstanding on the point. Some who claim that there is still within the Christian an “old nature” go on to say that when the Christian sins it is the old nature that is sinning. But it must be said that when the Christian sins, it is the Christian *person* who sins, and the person is responsible and accountable for his sin. The Christian person is to be described by, or characterized by, a new nature. The nature describes and defines the person. When, then, the Christian sins, he is sinning in his new nature, and it is that that grieves the Holy Spirit (Eph 4:30) and tarnishes the sweetness and joy of the Christian’s fellowship with God. It is the fact that the Christian sins *in his new nature* that underlines

the gravity of sin and the shame of it in the Christian life.

The biblical data present the antidote and remedy for sin. Reflecting the issues of status and life to which we have referred, Paul argues to the Colossian church: “As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him” (Col 2:6). And to the Galatians he says in similar vein: “If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit” (Gal 5:25). The ethical imperative is clear and need not be rehearsed at length to the practiced Christian. But what of the remedy for sin? “If we confess our sin,” John states, “He [God] is faithful [that is, he is faithful and just in himself (Rom 3:26) and he is covenantally faithful to those whom he has redeemed] to forgive us our sin, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). It is on that level, in that respect, and for that purpose that the Christian has the free and unimpeded access to the Father which unbroken and unbreakable fellowship with God provides to him. He has access to the very throne room of heaven as he comes in repentance and contrition. The Father, with unbounded love, waits to receive him again.

We do well to be alert to the deceitfulness of sin. Sin is hideous. It is treacherous and subtle, and the devil with his fallen angels who “kept not their first estate” (Jude 6), can be deceptively “transformed into an angel of light” (2 Cor 11:14). But what is sin, and how easily can the careless “walker in light” be deceived and fall into sin? If the Christian ignores his sin, and if, more damaging to the soundness of his “fellowship with God” and the joy it renders possible, he ignores the Holy Spirit’s convicting his conscience of sin, he is, as John also says, deceiving himself and to that extent he is living a lie. The truth, at that point is “not in him” (1 John 1:8).

What, then, is sin? Sin, John tells us (1 John 3:4), is “the transgression of the

law.” In the context of the Christian’s progress in sanctification, that reminds us that the moral law of God is the rule of life for the Christian believer. He is to know the law, to love the law, and to strain every nerve to live according to the law. Again, sin is whatever, in speech or action or social and cultural commitment, offends or outrages the holiness of God (recall 1 John 1:5). Sin is what turns the Christian’s focus and orientation of life from God to himself. Sin may be active and deliberate, a forthright acting against a godly conscience, or it may be passive, a failure to do what should be done, an omission. What is involved may be sin of ignorance. That does not mean ignorance of the law. For compare David’s prayer: “Cleanse thou me from *secret faults*” (Ps 19:12); or the words of Moses in Psalm 90:8, “Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our *secret sins* in the light of thy countenance.” The true believer may not even be conscious of sins that are for a time hidden from his awareness. How subtle sin and the danger of sin is! How we as God’s people should be alert to that subtlety!

But what is the ground on which God can forgive the Christian’s sin, can call him again to himself, make him again conscious of his covenantal privileges, and can restore him, not to fellowship with him, not to again “walking in the light,” but to the joy and the contentment of the unbreakable fellowship with himself that his very being born again connoted? The ground on which God can forgive the sin is the fact that our Lord Jesus Christ has already paid the penalty for all our sin. When Christ died on our behalf he provided a complete and total atonement for all our sin, past, present and future. There could never, therefore, be any further condemnation (Rom 8:1), our “old man,” the Adamic man, was “crucified with Christ” (Rom 6:6); he is dead and gone; and we have the clear mandate from God to “reckon ourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive

unto God” (Rom 6:11). The method by which God “cleanses us” when we have sinned is by the calming assurance of sonship that he conveys to us by his Holy Spirit. Because he has “loved us with an everlasting love” (Jer 31:3) he again draws us to himself, he confides his love to us, and he heals the broken heart of contrition that we bring to him.

But a terrible warning remains. If we continue to ignore our sin we not only lie in ourselves. We “make him [God] a liar” (1 John 1:10); that is, we reject his promise that he will forgive us and cleanse us. Further, if we were to respond to the subtle overtures of Satan and imagine that we could “continue in sin that grace may more abound” (Rom 6:1) we would fall into the trap of self-deception and antinomianism. The more the reason, then, why we should be diligent in prayer that God will preserve in us a conscience that is acutely sensitive to the danger and meaning of sin that grieves him (Eph 4:30).

In the ways we have now examined, the Christian’s highest good, the highest promise of the gospel that the twentieth chapter of the *Savoy Declaration* contemplated, exists in the privilege that is accorded him of “fellowship with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.” In the light of that, there lies ahead the need to reflect on the essential characteristics exhibited by those who, by the grace of God, have been admitted to that status. We are not able to proceed to that discussion at this time. We can observe in short, however, one further aspect of the redemptive activity of our Lord that has made all of those privileges and blessings possible. It rests in the propitiatory and intercessory activities of Christ as important aspects of his discharge of his high priestly office. For it is those actions that both make the Christian believer’s privileges possible and which guarantee the communication of them to him.

What, then, is the gospel, and what are its promises? It is that God will produce in his people, the “elect,” as the *Savoy* referred to them, “a new spiritual life,”⁹ with the higher reaches of implication for blessing that it carries with it. Our argument in the foregoing has been designed to bring into focus some aspects of those higher reaches of what that gospel promise implies for those whom, by his sovereign grace, God the Father draws to himself in his Son Jesus Christ.

The final question we raised at the beginning has to do with the extent to which the full intent of the promise of the gospel is contained in the so-called evangel that the church in general promotes at this time. The long answer to the question would take up a discussion of the several deviations from the historic Reformed testimony that have excited controversy in recent times: the theology of Open Theism, the New Perspective on Paul, the Federal Vision theology, and the statements of the so-called emergent church that appears to attempt an accommodation with the thought-forms of contemporary postmodernism. We have discussed those in other places. The short answer to our question resides in our dissent from what appears to be almost pervasive in evangelicalism, a semi-Pelagian gospel in which the sovereignty of God in the administration of his grace is displaced by assumptions of the competence of human reason and a synergism, if not an autosoterism in salvation.

It is from such gospel corruptions, and from the deleterious implications they inevitably have for progress in the fullness of Christian life that our fathers in the faith who gave us the *Savoy Declaration* were at pains to preserve us. May their message continue to find announcement in our uncertain day, and may it bear still further fruit in the lives of many to the glory of God.

⁹ *Savoy*, loc. cit.