

THE CONFESSION

of the

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

A STUDY COMMENTARY ON THE
WESTMINSTER STANDARDS

4TH EDITION
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*The Confession of the Presbyterian Church:
A Study Commentary on the Westminster Standards*
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 based on and inspired by
 the "Tree of Life,"
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Confessional Index

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Preface

The Confession of the Presbyterian Church: A Study Commentary on the Westminster Standards began in 2012 as a series of lessons on sections of the confessional standards of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church: the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (WCF), the *Westminster Larger Catechism* (WLC), and the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (WSC). The present author created these lessons to be used in training the first class of officers for a new church plant in State College, Pennsylvania: Resurrection Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

The present author prepared a second edition in 2016-2017 for a midweek study entitled, "Bible Doctrine: Connecting the Dots in God's Story." The original lessons on the confessional standards were revised, several were expanded, and a new introductory lesson was added to demonstrate the biblical basis for creating and utilizing written statements of faith. Along with these updates was added a new diagram, "The Map: Through This World to the Next," which visualizes the logical structure of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* using the analogy of a network of railway lines.

The third edition added a new introduction, modest revisions throughout the main chapters, and several preliminary "overview" chapters. In this fourth edition, those overview lessons have been removed, with certain useful portions incorporated elsewhere in the text.

Theological convictions deepen and develop over time, as does theological caution and nuance. The current edition reflects the present author's convictions as of the date of its publication, and its judgments – whether by expression, expansion, or redaction – should therefore be viewed as superseding those contained in previous editions.

All references to the "OPC" herein refer to the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the denomination in which the present author was ordained and has served since 2011.

The present author gratefully acknowledges that "the Map" is based, with permission, on a previous diagram – "the Tree of Life" (Appendix 1) – created by the late Rev. Steven F. Miller in 1990.

The harmonization of the Westminster Standards used in this study guide follows the arrangement of Rev. Dr. Morton H. Smith, published in 1990 as *A Harmony of the Westminster Standards*. Though the present guide may be used in the absence of that work, Smith's volume is the ideal companion to our studies – and every lesson references the appropriate page numbers in his work.

Convinced of the value of studying the Bible through the lens of the church's historic confessions of faith, the present author commits the following material to that end. If it enables even one reader to a greater appreciation of who God is, and a clearer, more connected vision of what God has done in history and reveals in Scripture, it will have accomplished its purpose.

Rev. Jeremiah W. Montgomery
April 2023

Introduction: The Corridor and the Rooms

C.S. Lewis ended the preface to *Mere Christianity* with the following encouragement to his readers:

I hope no reader will suppose that 'mere' Christianity is here put forward as an alternative to the creeds of the existing communions—as if a man could adopt it in preference to Congregationalism or Greek Orthodoxy or anything else. It is more like a hall out of which doors open into several rooms. If I can bring anyone into that hall I shall have done what I attempted. But it is in the rooms, not in the hall, that there are fires and chairs and meals. The hall is a place to wait in, a place from which to try the various doors, not a place to live in. For that purpose the worst of the rooms (whichever that may be) is, I think, preferable. It is true that some people may find they have to wait in the hall for a considerable time, while others feel certain almost at once which door they must knock at. I do not know why there is this difference, but I am sure God keeps no one waiting unless He sees that it is good for him to wait. When you do get into your room you will find that the long wait has done you some kind of good which you would not have had otherwise. But you must regard it as waiting, not as camping. You must keep on praying for light: and, of course, even in the hall, you must begin trying to obey the rules which are common to the whole house. And above all you must be asking which door is the true one; not which pleases you best by its paint and panelling. In plain language, the question should never be: 'Do I like that kind of service?' but 'Are these doctrines true: Is holiness here? Does my conscience move me towards this? Is my reluctance to knock at this door due to my pride, or my mere taste, or my personal dislike of this particular door-keeper?'

When you have reached your own room, be kind to those who have chosen different doors and to those who are still in the hall. If they are wrong they need your prayers all the more; and if they are your enemies, then you are under orders to pray for them. That is one of the rules common to the whole house.¹

Having read these words for the first time somewhere around the age of 17, the present author has never yet found a better analogy through which to consider the unity, beauty, and danger of denominations in Christianity. The unity consists in the fact that all believing denominations are in reality part of a single home: "the household of God" (Eph. 2.19), "God's building," (1 Cor. 3.9). We all share a common confession of core tenets – the "Great Tradition" of the Christian faith. These are the truths confessed in the *Apostles' Creed* and the *Nicene Creed*, and they comprise what Lewis likens to "a hall out of which doors open into several rooms." In the end, there is but one "holy catholic church" – that is, one single body of Christ spread across time and place, language and race.

Yet as Lewis reminds us, one doesn't live in the corridor: "the hall is a place to wait in... not a place to live in." However long it may take to make a selection, each of us must eventually settle into one of the rooms. These rooms represent the various Christian congregations, the believing communities and families to whom we bind ourselves in mutual love, support, and accountability. This is a crucial step in Christian growth: carefully, prayerfully, we must choose a spiritual home.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (reprint, New York: Macmillan, 1981), xlv.

It is at this point that we will be confronted with the danger of denominations: the temptation to spiritual pride. Just as a fervent patriot may allow love of homeland to foster a conceited or condescending spirit toward other cultures, so a denominational Christian may easily fall into the temptation of denigrating or demonizing other denominations. Thus Lewis reminds us: “when you have reached your own room, be kind to those who have chosen different doors and to those who are still in the hall. If they are wrong they need your prayers all the more; and if they are your enemies, then you are under orders to pray for them.” In choosing a spiritual home, we must not leave humility in the hallway.

On the other hand, we must not allow wariness of the danger of denominations to prevent us from enjoying their beauty. A room has distinct advantages over a corridor: “it is in the rooms, not in the hall, that there are fires and chairs and meals.” A denomination provides a shared framework for faithfulness: a common set of principles and practices that animate, guide, and organize our worship, work, and witness. And just as each room in a home has its own distinctive look and feel, so every Christian denomination has its own particular convictions and culture – its own peculiar emphases and ethos. These things do not spring into existence overnight. Rather, they are the product of long years of biblical reflection and historical experience. And while it’s true that they can easily become a snare, we must not overlook the fact that they also provide a solid foundation for spiritual progress and stability.

Putting it all together, we can perhaps draw three conclusions. First, we must remember that the Christian church, globally and historically, involves a series of concentric confessional circles. The outermost ring is the Great Tradition drawn and bounded by the *Apostles’* and *Nicene* creeds. Inner circles define the various denominations. Second, every believing denomination must remember that every other believing denomination is within the Great Tradition. Third, while remembering this, no denomination should be ashamed of its individual tradition. Ours is not the only tradition; it would be wrong to forget this. But our tradition is ours, and it is not wrong for us to lean into it.

The present author has spent his entire life in the Reformational, Presbyterian tradition of the Christian church – specifically, in one denomination: the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Yet he has had many opportunities to interact with Christians from other traditions, both in North America and in nations on the far side of the world. All of this has served only to reinforce Lewis’s analogy: there is much life in other denominations, and yet: one need not be ashamed of living in one’s own. Provided we never lose sight of the Great Tradition, we should not be afraid to lean into and embrace the identity of our own tradition.

The material in this book is intended to unpack the theological tradition of the Reformational, Presbyterian tradition. In presenting this material, the hope of the present author is to aid others in coming to understand and identify with that tradition – not because it has no flaws or has never erred, but because it possesses the fullest and most accurate understand of the Scriptures currently available. As Lewis said:

Above all you must be asking which door is the true one; not which pleases you best by its paint and panelling. In plain language, the question should never be: ‘Do I like that kind of service?’ but ‘Are these doctrines true: Is holiness here? Does my conscience move me towards this? Is my reluctance to knock at this door due to my pride, or my mere taste, or my personal dislike of this particular door-keeper?’

Chapter 1: The Map

Readings

Montgomery, "The Map"

Introduction

The goal of these sessions will be to familiarize ourselves with the doctrines of the Bible as summarized in the confessional standards of the historic Presbyterian Church: the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (WCF), *Larger Catechism* (WLC), and *Shorter Catechism* (WSC). These standards are not above the Bible, but they form a time-tested lens by which we may read and interpret the Bible. Every officer in a Bible-believing Presbyterian church must subscribe to these standards at the time of his ordination.

In this first session, we are going to discuss the *legitimacy* of confessional theology, how our confessions show us the *logic* of biblical theology, and how they serve as our *lens* – helping us to connect the dots in God’s story.

The Legitimacy of Confessional Theology

The first question we should ask ourselves is, “Is it legitimate for Christians, committed to the supreme authority of Scripture, to use written confessions of faith?” This question can be divided into two sub-questions: 1) does God *permit* it? and, 2) does God *encourage* it? Both questions can be answered from the text of Scripture itself.

Does God permit his people to make use of written confessions of faith? Consider the following passages from Scripture:²

And you shall make response before the LORD your God, “A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor. Then we cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders. And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which you, O LORD, have given me.” And you shall set it down before the LORD your God and worship before the LORD your God. (Deuteronomy 26.5-10)

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. (1 Corinthians 15.3-8)

² Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing minister of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. (1 Timothy 1.15)

Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory. (1 Timothy 3.16)

None of the above passages replace the more extensive Scriptures they reflect – and yet they do clearly demonstrate the permissibility of summarizing Scripture.

Yet perhaps we are not yet convinced. After all, we might remind ourselves that we are not apostles – and therefore the summaries we write are not protected by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Fair enough. So the question may remain: does Scripture anywhere encourage us to use our own summaries of biblical teaching? To answer this question, let us consider the following passage:

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. (Romans 12.6-8)

Of particular importance in the section of verse 6 that speaks of the exercise of prophecy. Most major English translations render it similarly, using the phrase “in proportion...” But the Greek says: “*kata tēn analogian tēs pisteōs*” – literally, “according to the analogy of the faith.” In an extended but important passage, theologian John Stott explains the significance of this phrase:

The first *charisma* Paul mentions here is *prophesying*, that is, speaking under divine inspiration. In Ephesians 2.20 apostles and prophets are bracketed as the foundation on which the church is built. So that reference to foundation-prophets is likely to be to the biblical prophets, including those New Testament authors who were prophets as well as apostles, such as Paul and John. In two lists of *charismata*, however, prophets are placed in a secondary position to the apostles, suggesting that there was a lesser prophetic gift, subsidiary to that of the biblical prophets. Words spoken by such prophets were to be ‘weighed’ and ‘tested’ (1 Cor. 14.29; 1Thes. 5:19-21; 1Jn. 4.1), whereas the apostles were to be believed and obeyed, and no sifting process was deemed appropriate or necessary in their case. Another difference seems to have been that prophets spoke to a local situation, whereas the authority of the apostles was universal... It is in the light of these differences that we should understand the regulation which Paul here places on the exercise of the prophetic gift... we should note that ‘faith’ has the definite article, and we should translate the phrase “in agreement with the faith.” That is, “the prophet is to make sure that his message does not in any way contradict the Christian faith.”³

Notice the importance of this passage. In dealing with a situation where non-apostles are teaching the Christian faith, they are to be held to an objective standard – “the analogy of the faith.” In an era where the New Testament was yet to be completed, what would such a standard have been except a formalized – either orally memorized, or written – summary of the essentials of Christian truth?

³ John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Romans* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 326-327. The final quote cited by Stott is from the commentary on Romans by C.E.B. Cranfield.

Another passage to consider comes from Paul's last surviving letter:

Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you. (2 Timothy 1.13-14)

Notice here, that as Paul contemplates the Timothy ministering in a post-apostolic world (cf. 2Tim 4.6), he exhorts his protégé not simply to follow the “sound words,” but to “follow the *pattern* of the sound words.” Does this not imply that, within the words of Scripture, there is a logical pattern?

It seems then, that we are on safe ground in making and using written confessions of faith, provided we follow two rules: 1) we understand our confessions of faith *not as replacements for God's Word, but as summaries of it*, and 2) we *test our confessions of faith* by the objective standards of God's Word.

The Logic of Biblical Theology

Having established the legitimacy of written confessions of faith, we should now ask an equally important question: what is their *purpose*? The answer to this question lies in a simple analogy – that of a *concordance*.

Most Christians have seen, and many even own, a concordance to the Bible. A concordance is a typically large book, listing all of the most important words in the Bible alphabetically. Then, next to the entry for each word, there is a list of all (or at least of the most important) passages of Scripture where that word is found. Especially in the days before digital search tools, a reliable concordance was considered an essential component in the library of a serious Christian.

A reliable confession of faith is nothing more – and nothing less! – than a *theological concordance*. The WCF, for example, lists thirty-three different important theological topics. For each of these topics, the confession carefully summarizes and logically arranges the teaching of the Bible on that subject. For each paragraph and most sentences, Scripture references are provided. These not only allow the serious Christian to “check the work” of the confessional theologians; they also show us where in Scripture to find God's own words on the topic in question!

Our Lens – Connecting the Dots in God's Story

As we study the doctrines of the Bible, using our written confessions as a guide, we come to see that there is a unified, logical, and beautiful shape to God's story of salvation. It is a story of our Creator, his creation, and his covenants. All of Scripture's story can be divided into twelve historical acts:

Stage	Dates (Approx.)	Books
Prologue	Creation – 2200 BC	Genesis 1-11
Patriarchs	2200 – 1805 BC	Genesis 12-50
Exodus	1446 BC	Exodus 1-19
Wilderness	1446 – 1406 BC	Exodus 20 – Deuteronomy 34
Conquest	1485 – 1375 BC	Joshua 1-24
Disintegration	1375 – 1050 BC	Judges 1 – Ruth 4
Unification	1050 – 930 BC	1 Sam. 1-1 Ki. 11; 1 Ch. 1-2 Ch. 9; Psalms-Song of Solomon
Division	930 – 586 BC	1 Ki. 12 – 2 Ki 25; 2 Ch. 10 – 36; Isaiah – Zephaniah
Exile	586 – 538 BC	Jeremiah-Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel
Post-Exile	538 – 400 BC	Ezra-Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Esther, Malachi
Fulfillment	6 BC – AD 33	Matthew – John
Finale	AD 33 – New Creation	Acts – Revelation

Yet this twelve-act *drama* can itself be understood as the outworking of *four* major epochs of human history, involving God’s *two* basic covenants with humanity:

Stage	Scriptures	Covenant
Creation	Genesis 1.1-2.25	Covenant of Works
Rebellion	Genesis 3.1-13	
Rescue	Genesis 3.14 – Revelation 20.15	Covenant of Grace
Consummation	Revelation 21-22	

At this point, there may be quite a bit that is unclear. Much of it will be fleshed out in later sessions. For now, the most important thing to note is that the Christian faith revealed in the Bible has a clear structure – and that if we learn that structure, our faith and practice will be better-equipped.

Testimonial

Growing up in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the present author remembers reciting the WSC on a weekly basis during public worship. But it never seemed to be anything more than a flat list: 107 questions and answers about God, written in King James English. I followed along with the rest of the congregation, but never saw much value – and didn’t take it very seriously.

It was not until I was studying for licensure as a ministry candidate that I was forced to take the WSC, along with the WCF and the WLC, seriously. But even then, the prospect was hardly exciting. Initially, I approached the study the way one would approach any body of material that must be committed to memory: with grim determination, but not with delight.

Then something happened. A minister in my presbytery, Rev. Steve Miller, sat me down and gave me a copy of a diagram he called “the Tree of Life.”⁴ The moment I saw this diagram, my theological life changed. For the first time ever, I saw that there was a logical structure to the theology of the Bible. From that moment on, though I knew there was still much to learn, I approached the study of doctrine with a new relish. For the Bible was no longer an obtuse *maze*; there was a clear *map* to what it revealed.

The lesson I take from this is clear: *when one has a clear map, the maze disappears and marvel awakens*. It is my hope that as we continue these studies, you will come to share my experience.

Important Questions

1. Is there any such thing as a Christian church without a creed?
2. What are the benefits of publishing written creeds? What are the dangers?

For Next Session

Read: Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 11-15, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
1	1-5	1-3

Write: Try writing your own basic summary of the gospel message.

⁴The present author’s own diagram, “the Map,” was adapted with permission directly from Rev. Miller’s painting – the original of which remains to this day in Eritrea, where Steve served as a missionary from 1998-1999.

Chapter 2: Finding True North

Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 11-15:

WCF	WLC	WSC
1	1-5	1-3

Introduction

In our first session, we discussed the *legitimacy* of confessional theology, how confessions show us the *logic* of biblical theology, and how they serve as a *lens* to help us connect the dots in God’s story.

In this session we dive into our Confession and Catechisms to see how they help us find our “true north”: showing us both *our true direction* (the meaning of human existence), and directing us to *God’s compass* that will guide us to our goal.

Our True Direction

The biggest question all people face is: “What is the meaning of life?”

In his book, *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years*,⁵ author Donald Miller compares life to telling a story. Just like every story has a main character, employing various means and experiencing various trials in pursuit of some overarching goal, so all people – both Christians and non-Christians – spend their lives seeking something they believe will give their existence meaning and purpose.

Almost two centuries prior to Miller, Scottish Presbyterian Thomas Chalmers tapped into this same idea: *all people are at all times chasing after something*. As we move from childhood to adulthood, ours goals may change – yet the fundamental pursuit remains the same:

The boy ceases, at length, to be a slave of his appetite, but it is because a manlier taste has now brought it into subordination; and that the youth ceases to idolize pleasure, but it is because the idol of wealth has become the stronger and gotten the ascendancy and that even the love of money ceases to have the master over the heart of many a thriving citizen, but it is because drawn into, the whirl of city politics, another affection has been wrought into his moral system, and he is now lorded over by the love of power. There is not one of these transformations in which the heart is left without an object.⁶

All of us are telling stories with our lives. As Christians, we seek to live in the better story of God – and we have the duty to invite outsiders to do the same. But we will never succeed simply by showing them that the world’s way is bad. *We must also show them that God’s way is better*. This is Chalmers’s key insight:

Such is the grasping tendency of the human heart, that it must have a something to lay hold of.... The love of the world cannot be expunged by a mere demonstration of the world’s worthlessness.... The heart is not so constituted; and the only way to dispossess it of an old affection, is by the expulsive power of a new one.⁷

⁵ Donald Miller, *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009).

⁶ Thomas Chalmers, *The Expulsive Power of a New Affection* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 35-36.

⁷ Ibid.

What affection is strong enough to expel the love of the world? J.I. Packer explains:

What makes life worthwhile is having a big enough objective, something which catches our imagination and lays hold of our allegiance; and this is what the Christian has in a way no other person has. For what higher, more exalted, and more compelling goal can there be than to know God?⁸

This is what both the WLC and the WSC indicate with their first questions and answers. In speaking of “man’s chief end,” the catechism is answering humanity’s biggest question. The meaning of life is “to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”⁹

What do we mean when we speak of *glorifying* God? At its most basic level, “The idea is to ‘magnify.’ Think of a telescope: it does not ‘make large’ a distant planet, but allows you to see how large it really is. If you ‘glorify’ the LORD, you do not make God great – but you recognize God’s greatness.”¹⁰ More specifically, we mean at least six things:¹¹

1. Acknowledgement of God’s revelations,
2. Confidence in God,
3. Affection for God,
4. Worship of God,
5. Obedience to God,
6. Promotion of God’s kingdom.

What do we mean when we speak of *enjoying* God? Vincent writes, “to enjoy God, is to acquiesce or rest in God as the chief good, with complacency and delight.”¹² This enjoyment has two stages: enjoying God *here* (in this life), and enjoying God *hereafter* (in eternity). The former involves settling upon, cleaving to the Lord in faith, and enjoying the sensible expressions of his special love. The latter involves seeing God face to face and enjoying the full sense of his love.

It is worth noting, that *we can never separate glorifying and enjoying God*. These twin duties are like two sides of the same coin: if we seek to glorify God, we will learn to enjoy it. If we would truly enjoy God, we must learn to glorify him. “Man’s chief end” is *singular*. The introduction to our standards, then, gives us far more than a preamble. It gives us the “true north” of human existence – the real meaning of life, and the goal toward which our life stories should aim.

God’s Compass

Having established our goal, the question naturally follows: how do we reach it? A direction is of little use without a compass. *What compass has God provided to point us to man’s chief end?*

The answer given in our standards is simple: the compass to glorifying and enjoying God is the Bible. This is why both our confession and catechisms start with sections discussing Holy Scripture. In the remainder of our session, let us consider the *canon* of Scripture.

The word ‘canon’ comes from the Greek word *kanōn* (“a straight rod used as a rule”) and the Hebrew word *qāneh* (‘reed,’ ‘rod’). It means ‘rule’ or ‘standard’. When we speak of *the canon of Scripture*, we use the word in a sense which means “the *list* of books which are acknowledged to be, in a unique sense, the *rule* of belief and practice.”¹³

⁸ Packer, *Knowing God*, 34.

⁹ WSC 1.

¹⁰ Al LaCour, *“Is There a Global God You Can Trust?” Study Guide* (Atlanta: RUF International, 2010), 17.

¹¹ Thomas Vincent, *The Shorter Catechism Explained from Scripture* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1980), 14-15

¹² *Ibid.*, 15.

¹³ F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 17-18.

According to our confessions, the canon of Scripture consists in the Old and New Testaments. Because these alone are the Word of God, they are “the only rule of faith and obedience” (WLC 1) – “the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him,” (WSC 1). Lest there be any doubt about which books are included (and which are not), the WCF lists out the books of the Old and New Testaments (1.2) – and explicitly rejects the books of the Apocrypha (1.3).

But this raises a foundational question: *how do we know which books are to be included/rejected?* Why do we accept the Hebrew Old Testament, but not the (Greek) Apocrypha? Why do we accept only twenty-seven books in the New Testament?

The Canon of the Old Testament

For the Old Testament, we take as our guide the Lord Jesus himself. In Luke 24.36-49, we have an account of Jesus appearing after his resurrection to his disciples. Especially notable in this passage is what Jesus says in v. 44: “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.”

Why is this important? Because the Hebrew Bible – what we know today as “the Old Testament” – was divided into three parts: *the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings*. “The Law” referred to Genesis-Deuteronomy. Under “the Prophets,” the people of Israel had two divisions. The “Former Prophets” were what we think of as the historical books: Joshua-Kings. The “Latter Prophets” referred to Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve Minor Prophets. “The Writings” contained all the rest of our Old Testament, and was itself divided into the three sections. In the first section of the Writings was the Psalms. So when Jesus refers to “the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms” in Luke 24.44, he is recognizing the entirety of the Old Testament!

It is on the basis of this same passage that we reject the Greek Apocrypha. Because it is not mentioned, we have no positive warrant to treat its books as divinely inspired. Why not?

They were not part of the writings of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms, as Luke summarizes the Old Testament canon... Additionally, some of these books hid their true date and authorship under false names or false titles – so many in fact that the entire corpus of additional books is often called the ‘Apocrypha’ (or ‘hidden things’).¹⁴

Though they may be useful as historical records, they “are no part of the canon of the Scripture, and therefore are of no authority in the Church of God, nor to be any otherwise approved, or made use of, than other human writings,” (WCF 1.3).

The Canon of the New Testament

The reason we consider the New Testament to be a part of Scripture is because the Bible treats the New Testament writings as equal to those of the Old Testament. We can see this clearly in 1 Timothy 5.18: “For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer deserves his wages.’” In this verse the Apostle Paul cites two passages. The first of these is from the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 25.4). The second is from Luke’s Gospel (Luke 10.7). Paul links them together and calls both “the Scripture”! Another place where we see this same thing happening is 2 Peter 3.14-18, where Peter writes the following of the letters of Paul: “There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.” Peter includes Paul’s letters with the “other Scriptures”!

¹⁴ Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2014), 11.

How do we know which books belong in the New Testament? We rely on the testimony of the early church. Note: we rely not the *authority* of the early church, but rather her *testimony*. The difference here is crucially important.

In John 1.29-34, we see that John the Baptist was sent by God in order to identify Jesus as the Son of God. John *recognized* Jesus as God's Son, but John did not *make* Jesus into the Son of God! It is the same way with the New Testament. As those Christians living closest to the time of the inspired writers, the early church *recognized* all the books of the New Testament as having authority. But they did not *make* this authority.

How did this recognition unfold? By the latter half of the second century, the early church was beginning to reach a consensus on which Gospel accounts were authentic. For example, Irenaeus – bishop of Lyons – wrote the following:

Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching in Rome and laying the foundation of the Church. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by him. Afterwards John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon his breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia.¹⁵

Similarly, around AD 170, Tatian, an early Assyrian Christian published a volume known as the *Diatessaron* – in which our four canonical Gospels were interwoven into a single, seamless narrative. This testifies to the antiquity of the reception of a “fourfold Gospel.”

At the same time as it was coming to recognize the fourfold Gospel, the church was also in the process of developing a collection of apostolic epistles into an ‘Apostle’ corpus. Clement of Rome, one of the early apostolic fathers writing around AD 96, instructs the church in Corinth to “Take up the epistle of the blessed Paul the Apostle. What did he first write to you at the beginning of his preaching? With true inspiration he charged you concerning himself and Cephas and Apollos, because even then you had made yourselves partisans.”¹⁶ This shows us that at least one of Paul’s letters (1 Corinthians) had made it to Rome before the end of the first century – which should be no surprise, as Paul himself encouraged the circulation of his letters (Col. 4.16). Clement also quotes from the Letter to the Hebrews.¹⁷

The link between the ‘Gospel’ and the ‘Apostle’ was the book of Acts. Having been separated from its companion volume (the Gospel of Luke) by the latter’s establishment as part of the fourfold Gospel, it was thereby enabled to act as a link between the two collections.¹⁸

Formal recognition of the New Testament canon was a process, not an event. The “Muratorian Canon,” a document from the late second century (c. AD 170), lists all of the modern New Testament canon except Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, and 3 John. In the first quarter of the fourth century (c. AD 300-325), Eusebius of Caesarea writes:

¹⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1.

¹⁶ Clement of Rome, *1 Clement*, trans. Kirsopp Lake, in *Apostolic Fathers I*, vol. 24 in *Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1912), 47.1-3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.1.

¹⁸ Bruce, *Canon of Scripture*, 132-133.

At this point it seems reasonable to summarize the writings of the New Testament which have been quoted. In the first place should be put the holy tetrad of the Gospels. To them follows the writing of the Acts of the Apostles. After this should be reckoned the Epistles of Paul. Following them the Epistle of John called the first, and in the same way should be recognized the Epistle of Peter. In addition to these should be put, if it seem desirable, the Revelation of John, the arguments concerning which we will expound at the proper time. These belong to the Recognized Books. Of the Disputed Books which are nevertheless known to most are the Epistle called of James, that of Jude, the second Epistle of Peter, and the so-called Second and third Epistles of John which may be the work of the evangelist or of some other with the same name.¹⁹

Keeping in mind that Eusebius included Hebrews among the “Epistles of Paul,”²⁰ we see here all twenty-seven of our New Testament as either ‘recognized’ or “disputed... nevertheless known to most.” The first official church proclamation listing all twenty-seven New Testament books is the Festal Letter of Athanasius (AD 367). But as we have seen from the passages cited earlier, the apostles treated the New Testament writings as Scripture as soon as they were written!

Preservation

Though the above-surveyed canonization process may seem somewhat messy, it is important for us to realize that there was a definite hand behind it all. Reflecting on our Lord’s promise – “For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished” (Matthew 5.18), our confession reminds us that the canons of the Old and New Testaments, “being immediately inspired by God,” were “by his singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages,” (WCF 1.8).

Conclusion

Right from the outset, our confession and catechisms offer us profound teaching. The meaning of human life is double-sided: to glorify and enjoy God. Our guide to this “chief end” is the Word of God written, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

Our standards say much more about the Bible. What of its authority and necessity? What of its inspiration and interpretation? What of its clarity, translation, and sufficiency? We will take up such topics in the future.

Important Questions

1. How does our society answer the question of the meaning of life? How does the Bible’s answer challenge this perspective? How does it show us a better way?
2. How does an understanding of the history of the canon of Scripture enhance your appreciation, as a Christian, for possession of the complete Bible?

For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 11-15, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
1	1-5	1-3

¹⁹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History, Books I-V*, trans. Kirsopp Lake, vol. 153 in *Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1926), 3.25.

²⁰ “And the fourteen letters of Paul are obvious and plain, yet it is not right to ignore that some dispute the Epistle to the Hebrews, saying that it was rejected by the church of Rome as not being by Paul, and I wil expound at the proper time what was said about it by our predecessors,” (ibid., 3.3). In a later section (6.14), he records the tradition that Paul wrote Hebrews in the Hebrew language, and that it was later translated into Greek and published by Luke.

Chapter 3: The Voice of God

Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 11-15:

WCF	WLC	WSC
1	1-5	1-3

Introduction

In our last session, we discussed how our standards (our Confession and Catechisms) show us purpose of life, the guide to pursuing that purpose, and the development of the canon of Scripture. In this session we dive into what our standards teach us about the *sufficiency* of Scripture, the *attributes* of Scripture, and the *interpretation* of Scripture.

A Sufficient Guide

Every serious Christian would agree that the Bible is an authoritative guide to Christian belief and practice. However, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches place extra-biblical Tradition alongside of Scripture. Many Protestant churches remain open to regular, new public revelations of the Spirit – or being open to the possibility that God might speak to believers occasionally in dreams or visions. How do our standard speak to these questions?

Our standards confess that though “it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself” in the days of the Old Testament and in the apostolic era, God has since been pleased “to commit the same wholly unto writing... those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased,” (WCF 1.1). Later in the same chapter (WCF 1.6), we read:

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.

This position articulated in our standards is known as *cessationism*. There are two forms of cessationism. “Hard” cessationism holds that extraordinary revelation, along with all extraordinary gifts, was a temporary provision given to the early church in order to lay its foundation (Eph. 2.19-20). Once the foundation was laid, extraordinary gifts gradually disappeared.

“Soft” cessationism takes a more cautious approach. It never argues with phenomena, nor does it require Christians who have had extraordinary experiences to deny them. However, it does insist on the sufficiency of Scripture: Scripture is our only rule for faith and practice. Though God is free to reveal himself in an extraordinary manner, we should not *expect* him to do so. When we seek the voice of God, we read the Bible. This is not a limit on *God*; it is a limit on *us*.²¹

²¹ The present author is indebted to Rev. Mark Jenkins for this particular expression.

Our standards cite several passages in support of cessationism:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. (Hebrew 1.1-2)

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty... But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

(2 Timothy 3.1, 14-17)

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts...

(2 Peter 1.16-19)

The argument of our standards seems to be as follows:

1. Hebrews 1.1-2 states that in these "last days," God has spoken to us through Jesus Christ.
2. In his final preserved letter, Paul makes reference to the "last days" and points Timothy to the teaching of Scripture, which he affirms is sufficient to equip believers for "every good work." (See also Jn. 20.30-31.)
3. In his final preserved letter, Peter similarly points to the prophetic word as "something more sure" even than his own personal eyewitness experience of the Lord's transfiguration. He encourages his readers to "pay attention" to the word, but does not encourage them to seek experiences similar to his.

In addition to these considerations, we might add the following:

1. The purpose of the extraordinary gifts was to attest to the authority of the message proclaimed by those who exercised them (Rom. 15.19, 2 Cor. 12.12, Heb. 2.3-4). Yet in his second letter to Timothy cited above, Paul claims Scripture carries its own authority. Similarly, the apostle John in his first letter writes, "the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth," (1Jn. 5.5; cf. Jn. 14.26).
2. Apart from Pentecost (Acts 2.1-4) and the household of Cornelius (Acts 10.44-46), the New Testament connects the imparting of extraordinary gifts with the laying on of the hands of the apostles (Acts 8.14-17, 19.6; 2Tim 1.6-7). But Paul asserts that he was the "last of all" to whom Christ appeared, "the least of the apostles" (1 Cor. 15.8-9).
3. There is some indication that the extraordinary gifts – at least the gift of healing – were vanishing even within the lifetime of the apostles. "Erastus remained at Corinth, and I left Trophimus, who was ill, at Miletus," (2 Tim. 4.20). Why is it that Paul, who had healed the sick (Acts 28.8) and even raised the dead (Acts 20.10), had to leave a friend behind who was ill?

From all of the above, it seems that there is significant biblical support for the cessationist position. However, we should be honest enough to admit that the "hard cessationist" position faces some difficult questions. For example, what are to make of the many reports from Middle Eastern countries, where individuals testify that the Lord Jesus appeared to them in a dream – after which

they professed faith and converted to Christianity? The present author once discussed this very question with a senior minister with foreign missionary experience. Here is the heart of his reply:

Spiritual experience is a very mysterious and varied thing. That is why having an anchor in Scripture and scriptural thinking is important. There are some verities that provide solid ground. From these it is unsafe to wander. 1. The Spirit of God communicates and saves when, where, and how he pleases. But, 2. Scripture is our only rule for faith and practice. 3. Dreams and experiences may leave a profound impact on us, but they are never to be grounds for action, or even relied upon as guidance. It may be that we ought not to attempt to understand dreams or interpret them by the Bible. Would this still be an attempt to accept them as revelation? And there are dreams, and then there are dreams. Further, 4. there are no new bodily appearances of Jesus from glory. Paul was the last. Our Lord did reveal himself in dreams and visions and send angels that were perceived as they gave their help. As our Saviour gives his help and deals with our souls and circumstances, are they varied and unusual experiences? Whatever a person's experience may be, if he believes the truth, stands publicly for baptism as a result of believing the Gospel that they have been taught, then we are to accept them as Christians. It is important to realize that 5. we cannot judge the truth or falsity of an account from such a distance. A Basic Rule of Thumb: Healthy skepticism is good, cynical anti-supernaturalism on the other hand, and naïve indiscriminating superstitious credulity are to be avoided at all costs.

Perhaps the most important conclusion we can draw from both Scripture and experience is the importance of humility in handling these matters.

The Attributes of Scripture

Throughout its first chapter, the WCF highlights nine attributes of Scripture. These are:

Attribute	Definition	Reference
Necessary	Only source of knowledge necessary for salvation	1.1
Inspired	Breathed out by the Holy Spirit	1.2-3
Self-Attesting	Carries intrinsic divine authority, attested by the Holy Spirit	1.4-5
Sufficient	Contains all things necessary for faith and life, either expressly stated or derived by logical deduction	1.6
Perspicuous	All things necessary for salvation clearly communicated	1.7
Inerrant	The original manuscripts are without error	1.8
Preserved	Original text providentially preserved, despite and through the history of textual transmission	1.8
Self-Interpreting	Difficult passages interpretable via clearer passages	1.9
Supreme	The Holy Spirit speaks in Scripture – thus no higher authority	1.10

Though an exhaustive discussion of these attributes would require numerous dedicated sessions, we may briefly touch upon a few in this section...

Necessary (WCF 1.1). God's revelation in creation and conscience is known as *general revelation*. It reveals to us his existence and our guilt, but not the way of salvation. Therefore what is needed is additional *special revelation* – the gospel message revealed in Scripture.

Inspired (WCF 1.2-3). God's Word was breathed out by his Spirit not in spite of, but through, the personalities of the inspired writers. This view is known as *organic inspiration*: "God acted upon the writers in an organic way. He used them in their own individual personalities. He created them, prepared them, prompted them to write, repressed their sinfulness, and guided them in an organic way to the choice of the very words they wrote."²² This is why the Gospel of John sounds different from the letters of Paul. God wanted John's Gospel, so he raised up and called John. The same is true for Paul.

²² Morton H. Smith, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Greenville, SC: GPTS Press, 1994), 87.

Self-Attesting (WCF 1.4-5). Though many secondary evidences may enhance our respect for Scripture, our “full persuasion” of its truth and authority must come from God himself: “For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men’s hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. The same Spirit, therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what had been divinely commanded... Let this point therefore stand: that those whom the Holy Spirit has inwardly taught truly rest upon Scripture, and that Scripture indeed is self-authenticated; hence, it is not right to subject it to proof and reasoning. And the certainty it deserves with us, it attains by the testimony of the Spirit.”²³

Inerrant/Preserved (WCF 1.8). Though the autographs are lost, about 5,400 fragments or manuscripts of the New Testament exist today.²⁴ This body of manuscript evidence, which dwarfs the textual basis for any other piece of ancient literature, is a fulfillment of Christ’s promise (Mt. 5.18). “The careful use of textual study enables us to reconstruct the original text on the order of 999 words out of every 1,000. In the New Testament there are only 375 variations that bear on the meaning of the passages, and even here there is no change of a doctrine, precept or fact.”²⁵

The Interpretation of Scripture

Our Confession lists several key principles to be used in the interpretation of Scripture:

1. “The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture...” (1.6)
2. “...or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture” (1.6)
3. “Inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary” (1.6)
4. “All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all” (1.7)
5. “Those things which are necessary... for salvation are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding...” (1.7)
6. “They are to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation” (1.8)
7. “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.” (1.9)
8. “The supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.” (1.10)

Like the attributes of Scripture, the interpretation of Scripture is a topic large enough to require separate, dedicated study. However, it will be useful for us to touch briefly upon several:

²³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vols. 20-21 in *The Library of Christian Classics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 1.7.4-5.

²⁴ For a more extended, yet accessible, discussion of the manuscripts and their variants, transmission, and reconstruction, see Greg Gilbert, *Why Trust the Bible?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 41-58.

²⁵ Smith, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 88.

Good and Necessary Consequence. Some teachings of the Bible are drawn not from explicit statements, but rather through logical deduction. For example, in Mark 12.24-27, Jesus rebukes the Sadducees for not realizing that Exodus 3.6 (“I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”) taught the resurrection of the dead.

Necessity of Inward Illumination. Though our standards teach cessationism, they do not teach anti-supernaturalism. “Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God,” (1 Cor 2.12).

Pastors, Personal Study, and Modern Translations. Because “all things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all,” pastors and teachers will be necessary. Yet because the basics of the gospel are accessible to all through study, personal study of the Bible is the privilege and responsibility of every Christian to whom Scripture is available. Therefore, the Bible should be translated into the common language of all peoples.

The Analogies of Scripture and of the Faith. Since no human authority may be placed above the voice of God in Scripture, only other Scripture may be used to explain Scripture. Difficult individual passages must be compared to other passages “that speak more clearly” (*the analogy of Scripture*) and to the teaching of the Bible as a whole (*the analogy of the faith*) in order to seek the God-intended sense of the text (“the true and full sense”).

The Holy Spirit Speaking. When Scripture speaks, God speaks. Every time the Bible is read, we heard the voice of God. “If God’s words are his personal, active presence, then to put your trust in God’s words is to put your trust in God... God acts through his words, the Word is ‘alive and active’ (Heb. 4.12), and therefore the way to have God dynamically active in our lives is through the Bible. To understand the Scripture is not simply to get information about God. If attended to with trust and faith, the Bible is the way to actually hear God speaking and also to meet God himself.”²⁶

Important Questions

1. How does a cessationist view of revelation bring spiritual stability to the Christian life?
2. Why is it important to be specific about our understanding of inspiration and inerrancy?
3. Does the supremacy of Scripture mean we should discard “all decrees of councils, [and] opinions of ancient writers”?

Additional Resources

G. Gilbert, *Why Trust the Bible?*

For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 16-18, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
2	6-11	4-6

²⁶ Tim Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York: Dutton, 2014), 54.

Chapter 4: The Living God

Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 16-18:

WCF	WLC	WSC
2	6-11	4-6

Introduction

In our last session, we looked at what our standards teach about the sufficiency of Scripture, its attributes, and its interpretation. Having concluded this three-part study of what the Bible teaches concerning itself, we now move into the next section of our standards to consider what the Bible teaches about who God is.

Why Theology Matters

As we turn to study the being of God, we might well ask ourselves: why is it important? What we believe about who God is matters for at least three reasons:

1. It is a matter of *eternity*. In a previous session, we talked about entering into God's story. But this presupposes that we have the right God! The Bible contains many warnings against idolatry. Therefore, if we truly want to know God, then we must know God truly.
2. It is a matter of *integrity*. If we claim to be people who live by God's revelation in Scripture, then we must study and take seriously what the Bible says about God.
3. This doctrine affords great *security* to the believer. The accomplishment of our redemption, our assurance of salvation, and the activation of faith in real life situations depends essentially on the Triune being of God, his unchanging (and thus utterly reliable) character, and the identity of Jesus as the second Person of this God. As Michael Reeves puts it:

"What makes Christianity absolutely distinct is the identity of our God. Which God we worship: that is the article of faith that stands before all others. The bedrock of our faith is nothing less than God himself, and every aspect of the gospel—creation, revelation, salvation—is only Christian insofar as it is the creation, revelation and salvation of this God, the triune God."²⁷

The Being of God

One of the best summary descriptions of God ever penned is found in WSC 4-6. The fourth question gives us the *attributes* of God, the fifth teaches us the *unity* of the Godhead, and the sixth details the *diversity* in the Godhead. The parallel sections in the WCF and WLC flesh these out in further detail. There are several things we should note.

First, we must always maintain that there is but *one God* (Dt. 6.4). Both the WLC and WSC use the expression "the same in substance." What does this mean? Substance is "equivalent to essence, independent being. Thus, in the Godhead, the three persons are the same in substance, *i.e.*, of one and the same indivisible, numerical essence."²⁸

²⁷ Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity: An Introduction to the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 15-16

²⁸ A.A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (reprint: Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1999), 164.

All three Persons of the Godhead share the same self-existence (*aseity*), and all three share all the attributes listed in WSC 4. Note how WSC 4 underlines this with the expression, “in *his* being, wisdom, power, etc.” Put another way:

Since there is but one divine essence, and since all attributes or active properties are inherent in and inseparable from the essence to which they pertain, it follows that all the divine attributes must be identically common to each of the three persons... there is but one substance, and one intelligence, one will, etc., and yet three persons eternally co-exist of that one essence, and exercise that one intelligence and one will, etc.²⁹

Second, alongside the unity of substance we must equally affirm that God is *three Persons*. The theological expression used here is that while there is but *one substance*, there are *three subsistences*. What is meant by ‘subsistence’? It is “that mode of existence which distinguishes one individual thing from every other thing, one person from every other person. As applied to the doctrine of the Trinity, subsistence is that mode of existence which is peculiar to each of the divine persons, and which in each constitutes the one essence a distinct person.”³⁰

But just what is it that makes each divine person distinct? WLC 9 tells us that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are “distinguished by their personal properties.” WCF 2.3 and WLC 10 describe these personal properties. Calvin unpacks these:

Nevertheless, it is not fitting to suppress the distinction that we observe to be expressed in Scripture. It is this: to the Father is attributed the beginning of activity, and the fountain and wellspring of all things; to the Son, wisdom, counsel, and the ordered disposition of all things; but to the Spirit is assigned the power and efficacy of that activity. Indeed, although the eternity of the Father is also the eternity of the Son and the Spirit, since God could never exist apart from his wisdom and power, and we must not seek in eternity a *before* or an *after*, nevertheless the observance of an order is not meaningless or superfluous, when the Father is thought of as first, then from him the Son, and finally from both the Spirit. For the mind of each human being is naturally inclined to contemplate God first, then the wisdom coming forth from him, and lastly the power whereby he executes the decrees of his plan. For this reason, the Son is said to come forth from the Father alone; the Spirit, from the Father and the Son at the same time.³¹

Yet having described the personal properties, Calvin reminds us:

Furthermore, this distinction is so far from contravening the utterly simple unity of God as to permit us to prove from it that the Son is one God with the Father because he shares with the Father one and the same Spirit; and that the Spirit is not something other than the Father and different from the Son, because he is the Spirit of the Father and the Son. For in each hypostasis the whole divine nature is understood, with this qualification— that to each belongs his own peculiar quality.³²

How can we carefully keep both the unity and diversity in God together? Calvin cites two helpful passages from the church fathers:

²⁹ Ibid., 167. Note that this statement does *not* deny that our Lord Jesus, being both fully God and fully man, also partook fully of his humanity, for Hodge immediately adds, “In Christ on the contrary, there are two spirits, two intelligences, two wills, and yet all the while *one* indivisible person,” (167-168).

³⁰ Ibid., 165.

³¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.18.

³² Ibid., 1.13.19.

Augustine well and clearly expresses the cause of this diversity in another place, when he speaks as follows: “Christ with respect to himself is called God; with respect to the Father, Son. Again, the Father with respect to himself is called God; with respect to the Son, Father. In so far as he is called Father with respect to the Son, he is not the Son; in so far as he is called the Son with respect to the Father, he is not the Father; in so far as he is called both Father with respect to himself, and Son with respect to himself, he is the same God.” Therefore, when we speak simply of the Son without regard to the Father, we well and properly declare him to be of himself; and for this reason we call him the sole beginning. But when we mark the relation that he has with the Father, we rightly make the Father the beginning of the Son.³³

And that passage in Gregory of Nazianzus vastly delights me: “I cannot think on the one without quickly being encircled by the splendor of the three; nor can I discern the three without being straightway carried back to the one.” Let us not, then, be led to imagine a trinity of persons that keeps our thoughts distracted and does not at once lead them back to that unity. Indeed, the words “Father,” “Son,” and “Spirit” imply a real distinction— let no one think that these titles, whereby God is variously designated from his works, are empty— but a distinction, not a division.³⁴

There is obvious mystery here, and we should beware of going beyond the very limited information provided to us in the Scriptures. In discussing this question with regard to Christ, John Owen cites warnings from two other church fathers:

[Lactantius, advisor to Constantine the Great]: “How, therefore, did the Father beget the Son? These divine works can be known of none, declared by none; but the holy writings teach that he is the Son of God, that he is the Word of God.”³⁵

[Ambrose of Milan]: “It is lawful to know that he was born – it is not lawful to discuss *how* he was born; *that* it is not lawful for me to deny – *this* I am afraid to inquire into. For if Paul, when he was taken up into the third heaven, affirms that the things which he heard could not be uttered; how can we express the mystery of the divine generation, which we can neither apprehend nor hear?”³⁶

Thirdly, we should note how WLC 11 demonstrates that both the Son and the Holy Spirit “are God equal to the Father.” The acronym to remember here is NAWW: *names, attributes, works, and worship*. The proof texts listed here (among others) are particularly helpful. How do we know the Son is fully God?³⁷

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.” (Jeremiah 23.5-6)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. (John 1.1-3)

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., I.13.17.

³⁵ John Owen, *On the Person of Christ*, in *The Glory of Christ*, vol. 1 in *The Works of John Owen* (reprint, Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1965), 13.

³⁶ Ibid., 14.

³⁷ Beyond these obvious examples, the New Testament is literally saturated with passages that teach the deity of Christ. See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" (John 14.8-9)

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. (Col. 1.15-20)

He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. (Hebrews 1.3)

How do we know the Holy Spirit is fully God?

But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." (Acts 5.3-4)

And disagreeing among themselves, they departed after Paul had made one statement: "The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet..." (Acts 28.25)

Beyond these Son-specific or Spirit-specific passages, one of the most striking passages is found in the Great Commission, where *three persons* are said to share *one name*: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..." (Matthew 28.19).

The Attributes of God

In addition to telling us how many persons are God, our standards also summarize for us the attributes of God. What do we mean by 'attribute'? "The divine attributes are the essential properties by which he makes himself known to us who are weak and those by which he is distinguished from creatures; or they are those which are attributed to him according to the measure of our conception in order to explain his nature."³⁸ Our standards list these attributes in WCF 2.1-2, WLC 7, and WSC 4.

Some of God's attributes are reflected in us. These are called *communicable* attributes – because in a limited and creaturely way, God communicates them to us. Examples include knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. God possesses these in an uncreated, infinite degree – yet he allows us to experience them in a created, limited way. However, there are other attributes of God which are unique to God. These are called *incommunicable* attributes. Examples include God's aseity, his eternity, and his infinity. These are the things that essentially mark the boundary between God as Creator and everything else as creatures.

The Scripture proofs listed in our standards do a good job of helping us understand the attributes of God. But before concluding this session, we might touch upon just a few.

First, what does WCF 2.1 mean when it says that God is "without... passions"? Does not the Scripture testify that God experiences anger, delight, love, etc.? J.I. Packer helpfully explains the statement – and why it matters so much:

³⁸ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1994), 3.5.5 (vol. 1, p. 187).

God has no *passions* – this does not mean that he is unfeeling (impassive) or that there is nothing in him that corresponds to emotions and affections in us, but that whereas human passions—especially the painful ones, fear, grief, regret, despair—are in a sense passive and involuntary, being called forth and constrained by circumstances not under our control, the corresponding attitudes in God have the nature of deliberate, voluntary choices, and therefore are not of the same order as human passions at all.

So the love of the God who is spirit is no fitful, fluctuating thing, as human love is, nor is it a mere impotent longing for things that may never be, it is, rather, a spontaneous determination of God’s whole being in an attitude of benevolence and benefaction, an attitude freely chosen and firmly fixed. There are no inconstancies or vicissitudes in the love of the almighty God who is spirit. His love is “as strong as death” (Song 8.6). “Many waters cannot quench love, rivers cannot wash it away” (Song 8.7). Nothing can separate from it those whom it has once embraced (Rom. 8.35-39).³⁹

Second, what does it mean to say that God is ‘immutable’ (WCF 2.1) or ‘unchangeable’ (WLC 7, WSC 4)? Did not God the Son become a man at a definite place and time in history? How then can we say he never changes? A.A. Hodge explains, “His eternal person was not changed in itself, but only brought into a new relation.”⁴⁰

Third, what does it mean to say that God is ‘incomprehensible’ (WCF 2.1, WLC 7)? Does not God make himself known to us in creation, revelation, and incarnation? J.I. Packer explains, “God is great, says Scripture... greater than we can grasp. Theology states this by describing him as incomprehensible – not in the sense that logic is somehow different for him from what it is for us, so that we cannot follow the workings of his mind at all, but in the sense that we can never understand him fully, just because he is infinite and we are finite.”⁴¹

Finally, what does it mean to say that God is “most wise” (WCF 2.1) or “infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his... wisdom” (WSC 4)? Thomas Vincent explains, “The wisdom of God is his essential property, whereby, by one simple and eternal act, he knoweth both himself and all things possible perfectly, and according to which he maketh, directeth, and ordereth all future things for his own glory.”⁴²

Why Theology Matters (Again)

Before concluding this session, it is worth revisiting the question with which we began. Why is it important for us to understand who God is? The answer is simple – *knowing who God is helps Christians understand who Jesus is – and vice-versa.*

Knowing who God is – “most holy... most just... hating all sin...” (WCF 2.1) – helps us understand both the character and the work of Jesus Christ. It reminds us that we cannot excuse sin by setting up a false dichotomy between the “God of the Old Testament” and Jesus. Jesus is the God of the Old Testament, whose character is ‘immutable’ (WCF 2.1) and ‘unchangeable’ (WLC 7, WSC 4). Jesus is no friendlier to sin today than he was on the day when he delivered the Ten Commandments upon Mount Sinai (Acts 7.38).

³⁹ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 121.

⁴⁰ Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 144.

⁴¹ J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1993), 51.

⁴² Thomas Vincent, *The Shorter Catechism Explained*, 29.

On the other hand, knowing Christ shows us the loving heart behind even the most intimidating attributes of God. In looking at Jesus, we see that though God will never *lie* about our sins, he did *die* for them (1Jn. 4.8-10). British theologian Michael Reeves writes, “Here, then, is the revolution: for all our dreams, our dark and frightened imaginings of God, *there is no God in heaven who is unlike Jesus.*”⁴³ He then quotes T.F. Torrance at length:

There is in fact no God behind the back of Jesus, no act of God other than the act of Jesus, no God but the God we see and meet in him. Jesus Christ is the open heart of God, the very love and life of God poured out to redeem humankind, the mighty hand and power of God stretched out to heal and save sinners. All things are in God’s hands, but the hands of God and the hands of Jesus, in life and in death, are the same.⁴⁴

Thirdly, knowing that Jesus is both “the open heart of God” and the God who is unchangeable provides a firm anchor for our faith. We know God won’t ever change his mind about those who trust him because “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever,” (Hebrews 13.8).

Finally, the doctrine of the Trinity is a powerful weapon against the sin of pride. Pride wants us to believe that ultimate reality is rivalry, and therefore we must always strive to ‘win’ at the expense of others. But the doctrine of the Trinity reminds us that God, who is *the* ultimate reality, is a community of persons in which there is eternal intimacy, perfect love, and mutual respect – with no rivalry. Therefore ultimate reality is not rivalry, but community. Christ emptied himself in order to bring believers into this community (1 Jn. 1.3). As we understand just how full we are in Christ, we will see that we have nothing to prove *and* nothing to lose – and we will cease to puff ourselves up.

Important Questions

1. Jehovah’s Witnesses say they worship Jehovah, but not Jesus. They say Jesus is a created being. Do they worship Jehovah (Jer. 23.5-6, Jn. 14.8-9)?
2. Mormons say they are Christians, but they believe that each divine person (Father, Son, Spirit) is a separate being. Do they worship the God of the Bible (Dt. 6.4)? Are they Christians?
3. Muslims say they worship the true God, but they also say that Jesus is only a human prophet. According to Jesus, do they worship the true God (cf. Jn. 5.23, Jn. 14.9)?
4. How does a knowledge of theology and of Christ – his character and work – help us understand that even God’s wrath cannot be separated from his love?

Additional Resources

Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*

J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*

Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity and Rejoicing in Christ*

For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 19-21, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
3	12-14	7-8

⁴³ Michael Reeves, *Rejoicing in Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 14.

⁴⁴ Cited in *ibid.*, 15.

Chapter 5: The Author of Life

Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 19-21:

WCF	WLC	WSC
3	12-14	7-8

Introduction

In our last session, we looked at what our standards teach about the being and attributes of God. In this session, we explore what can (and what cannot) be known about the eternal plan of God. In his speech at Solomon's Portico, the apostle Peter described the Lord Jesus as "the Author of Life." In this title there is both inexhaustible glory – and profound mystery.

Totality and Mystery

Our standards describe God's eternal plan for the universe in terms that reflect both its *totality* and its *mystery*:

1. God's plan is total:
 - a. "God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass..." (WCF 3.1)
 - b. "Although God knows whatsoever may or can come to pass upon all supposed conditions, yet hath He not decreed anything because He foresaw it as future..." (WCF 3.2)
 - c. "By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death." (WCF 3.3)
 - d. "These angels and men, thus predestinated and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed; and their number so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished." (WCF 3.4)
 - e. "As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath He, by the eternal and most free purpose of His will, foreordained all the means thereunto." (WCF 3.6)
2. God's plan contains mystery:
 - a. "...yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established." (WCF 3.1)
 - b. "The rest of mankind, God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of His own will, whereby He extendeth or withholdeth mercy, as He pleaseth, for the glory of His sovereign power over His creatures, to pass by, and to ordain them to dishonour and wrath for their sin, to the praise of His glorious justice." (WCF 3.7)

Given these parameters, we should pay careful attention to the opening words of the final paragraph: "the doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care," (WCF 3.8). We are on sacred ground, and must tread carefully.

The Author and the Book: An Analogy

As a starting point to wrestling with both the totality and mystery of God's eternal plan, the present author knows no better analogy than the relationship between an author and the book they create. How does an author relate to the world, characters, and action he or she creates? The most basic fact in this relationship is that *the author is "metaphysically transcendent" to – he or she exists above, outside, and over – the created universe of the story.*

This fact, which is true of all works of fiction, helps us understand two important aspects of the author-book relationship. First, it helps us understand how an author can be totally in control and characters can be truly free *at the same time*. Second, it helps us understand how the story can contain real evil *without making the author guilty*.

Consider, for example, the famous novels of J.R.R. Tolkien (*The Lord of the Rings*) or J.K. Rowling (*Harry Potter*). Each story takes the reader into its own self-contained world. Within the horizon of that world, each character acts freely and chooses to do good or to do evil. Never in either narrative do we read a description of tiny strings connected to Bilbo or Harry, Saruman or Voldemort, that made them act contrary to their desires. *Within the covers of the book, within the horizon of the story world*, each character acts truly and freely according to their nature. They are 100% responsible for their actions, because what they choose to do is 100% their choice.

At the same time, the human authors Tolkien and Rowling exercise 100% total control over every detail and event in the story. Everything that happens in each narrative occurs only because they planned it to happen. Nothing occurs that isn't part of their plan for the story. This 100% sovereignty of the author is no contradiction to the 100% responsibility of the characters because it, like the authors themselves, exists and operates at a level *above the horizon of the story world and outside the covers of the book*.

This distinction between the author and the book also gives us an inkling as to how stories can contain real evil without making the authors guilty. Within the books covers, some characters perform actions that are intrinsically evil and spring from evil motives – for example, the depredations of the orcs or the murders of Voldemort. Yet when we look at the actions of the authors above, outside, and over the story, planning all these actions for the purpose of accomplishing an ultimately good purpose, who can accuse Tolkien or Rowling of moral evil?

Though no analogy is perfect (see the next section), the present author believes this analogy is the closest to helping us see the relationship between the totality and the mystery of God's eternal plan. God is the author of all creation: "in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them," (Psalm 139.16). Yet God is not the author of sin: "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one," (James 1.13). As Solomon expresses it, "God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes," (Ecclesiastes 7.29).

Qualifications and Demonstrations

In explaining this section of our standards, Chad Van Dixhoorn offers three important qualifiers:

God did 'unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass', but this comprehensive statement requires three qualifying fences lest we should wander in directions that would prove dangerous. The first fence keeps out the idea that God could ever be the 'author of sin'.... The second fence is almost as important as the first... God's ordaining of whatsoever comes to pass does not do 'violence' to the will of men and women.... The third protective fence is that God's plan still employs real secondary causes... the liberty or freedom of these causes is real; the contingency or possibility of these events is not taken away... All events – even those events which we see as secondary causes – are also part of God's decree, and so God's decree establishes these causes and events too.⁴⁵

Beyond these qualifications, Van Dixhoorn points us to two passages of Scripture that together show the complete conjunction of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. During the judicial

⁴⁵ Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, 44-46.

proceedings prior to Christ's crucifixion, there is an informative private scene between the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, and the Lord Jesus:

[Pilate] entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. So Pilate said to him, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?" Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin." (John 19:9-11)

In these words, our Lord makes it clear that Pilate's power – the very power that would shortly condone the murder of God's own Son – came from God's own hand. Making it even more clear, Peter says in his sermon at Pentecost:

"Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know – this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it." (Acts 2:22-24)

The Bible clearly teaches that God is 100% in control. It also clearly teaches that human beings are 100% responsible. If the question is put, "Is God sovereign, or is man free?" – the only answer we can give is, "Yes."

Predestination and Reprobation

With this mystery in view and this tension acknowledged, we must carefully note the distinction which our standards make between God's plan to save some (*predestination*) and his decision to "pass by" the rest of mankind and "ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin," (WCF 3.7).

In God's eternal plan, Adam and Eve would freely choose, by their sin, to set the entire human race on the road to hell. Every one of their naturally conceived offspring is, from the moment of birth, moving toward destruction. Without divine intervention, the damnation of every such person is assured. This is the reality of the fall of mankind.

In this same eternal plan, God freely choose to rescue a fixed number of men and women in Christ. "Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to His eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of His will, hath chosen in Christ unto everlasting glory," (WCF 3.5). Yet a fallen human being, even an elect one, will not turn themselves away from sin to God. Therefore, "as God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath He, by the eternal and most free purpose of His will, foreordained all the means thereunto," (WCF 3.6). Thus *predestination* – a decision to save even one – commits God to *definite and dramatic intervention*.

In the case of the non-elect, however, God simply declines to intervene. He determines to "pass by" (*preterition*) "and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin," (*condemnation*). This is what is known as *reprobation* (from the Latin *reprobare*, which means "to disapprove"). People are *not* sent to hell because God passed by them. They are sent to hell because their sins deserve God's wrath. God's passing by them simply ensures that they will get what they deserve. So while preterition ensures condemnation, it is not the ground of it.

This distinction between *predestination* (intervention to ensure salvation) and *reprobation* (non-intervention resulting in damnation) is crucially important. In the former, God acts "to the praise of His glorious grace," (WCF 3.5); in the latter, "to the praise of His glorious justice," (WCF 3.7).

The Objection

In the face of the Bible's teaching about predestination and reprobation, many object. "It isn't fair," we are told. And if we're honest, most of us feel at least some of the force of this objection. But the universality of this objection is itself a clue. Remember: *behind every hard question is a hidden assumption*. That is especially true here. When we object to election, we are implicitly assuming the right to judge God. *Complaining that God gets to play God betrays our own inner grasping after his job*. Ever since the Garden of Eden, this has been the sin underneath all others (cf. Genesis 3.5).

Van Dixhoorn's response is apt: "Recall the conclusion of one of Jesus' parables, where the owner of the vineyard is criticized for injustice, and he responds with a question that exposes the critics' jealousy of his generosity... 'Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' (Matthew 20.8; see also Romans 9.14-15)"⁴⁶

Our Duty

At the beginning of this session, we noted our standards' admonishment that "the doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care," (WCF 3.8). We conclude with two final observations.

First, we must take care that we never permit our belief in predestination to excuse any dereliction in our *duty*. The Bible *reveals* that God has decreed some for everlasting life and some for eternal wrath. Yet at the same time the Bible *commands* us to take the gospel to all individuals and nations. A.A. Hodge offers a helpful distinction here: "While the principle of sovereign election as lying at the foundation of all grace is thus clearly revealed, the election or non-election of particular persons is not revealed in the Scriptures. The preceptive and not the decretive will of God is the rule of human duty."⁴⁷

Put another way, the Bible sets alongside the reality of predestination the reality of the free offer of the gospel. In his commentary on Edward Fisher's *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, Thomas Boston writes:

Even as when one presents a piece of gold to a poor man saying, "Take it, it is yours"; the offer makes the piece really his in the sense and to the effect before declared; nevertheless, while the poor man does not accept or receive it; whether apprehending the offer too great to be real, or that he has no liking of the necessary consequents of the accepting; it is not his in possession, nor hath he the benefit of it; but, on the contrary, must starve for it all, and that so much the more miserably, that he hath slighted the offer and refused the gift... Now what this gospel report, record, or testimony of God, to be believed by all, is, the inspired penman expressly declares, "This is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life; and this life is in his Son" (1 John 5.11). The giving here mentioned, is not giving in possession in greater or lesser measure, but giving by way of grant, whereupon one may take possession. And the party to whom, is not the election only, but mankind lost. For this record is the gospel, the foundation of faith, and warrant to all, to believe in the Son of God, and lay hold on eternal life in him; but that God hath given eternal life to the elect, can be no such foundation nor warrant: for that a gift is made to certain select men, can never be a foundation or warrant for all men to accept and take it... There may, indeed, be a giving where there is no receiving, for a gift may be refused; and there may be a taking where there is no giving, the which is a presumptuous action without warrant; but there can be no place for receiving of Christ where there is not a giving of him before.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Ibid., 49.

⁴⁷ A.A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (reprint: Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1998), 77.

⁴⁸ Thomas Boston, in Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2009), 136-137. For more on the free offer of the gospel, see Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

Boston's point is both profound and beautiful. Though not all will receive Christ, Christ is nevertheless freely given – by way of 'grant' or promise – to all mankind. Our belief in predestination must never, in any way, circumscribe our evangelism.

Finally, let us remember that while a thorough-going belief in predestination and reprobation is *biblical*, a denial of either (or both) is not automatically a denial of the gospel. Van Dixhoorn's reminder is most appropriate:

The decree of God has been the subject of too much debate in the history of the church. The reality is that the parties in these disputes are often much closer to one another than they admit. The happy truth is that those who dispute the absolute lordship of God check their arguments at the door when they enter their closets to pray. The sad truth is that those who defend a doctrine of divine sovereignty often complain when things do not go their own way, forgetting that their grumbling is against God.⁴⁹

As we conclude this session, let us remember how our own standards conclude this section. We study God's eternal plan so that "this doctrine [may] afford matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God, and of humility, diligence, and abundant consolation, to all that sincerely obey the Gospel," (WCF 3.8).

Important Questions

1. Is God the author of all things? Is God the author of sin? Is he the author of sinners?
2. Does God send people to hell? If not God, who? Is this fair?
3. Does God send people to heaven? If so, how? Is this fair?
4. Does predestination contradict the free offer of the gospel?
5. Is denial of predestination automatically a denial of the gospel?

Additional Resources

Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*

Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*

For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 22-23, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
4	15-17	9-10

⁴⁹ Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, 47.

Chapter 6: A Spreading Goodness

Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 22-23:

WCF	WLC	WSC
4	15-17	9-10

Introduction

In our last session, we looked at what our standards teach about the eternal plan of God. Shorter Catechism #8 tells us that “God executeth his decrees in the works of creation and providence.” It is to the first of these that we now turn.

Supernaturalism

The fourth chapter of the WCF deals with the doctrine of creation – both of the universe in general, and of man in particular. WSC 9 confesses, “The work of creation is, God’s making all things of nothing, by the word of his power, in the space of six days, and all very good.” Notice how much is said here:

1. *All things* includes both the material world and all living things. WCF 4.1 expands this to include “all things... whether visible or invisible” – including the angels (WLC 16).
2. *Of nothing* (Latin: *ex nihilo*) affirms that God did not begin with pre-existing material. As biblical scholar Meredith Kline has noted, this stands in stark contrast to all other ancient mythological accounts of the world’s origin:

The Genesis account itself does not make even a poetic use of the conflict theme current in extra-biblical cosmogony, the theme of slaying of the chaos monster by the hero-god as the means of founding the world order.... the Bible demythologizes the myth.... Not even in figurative imagery is there a suggestion of the use of the vast carcass of a vanquished deity as the material for man’s world, as in the case of Marduk’s cosmogonic conquest of Tiamat in the Mesopotamian tradition.⁵⁰
3. *By the word of his power* insists God’s mere word was sufficiently potent to create.
4. *All very good* affirms that evil and sin were not original to the created order.

These statements preclude any sort of materialist, naturalistic view of cosmic or human origins. Though we may disagree on some details, Christians must be thorough-going supernaturalists.

Order, Wonder, Creator

Among believers, perhaps the most hotly contested expression is the phrase “in the space of six days.” Does this mean six literal days of ordinary length, or can non-literal views be accepted? Though the question is not unimportant, its emphasis runs the risk of obscuring three primary purposes of the Genesis account, which is to *underline the order of creation, depict the wonder of creation, and reveal our Creator*. The order can be seen in creation’s structure:⁵¹

	<i>Form</i>		<i>Fullness</i>
Day 1	Light and dark	Day 4	Lights of day and night
Day 2	Sea and sky	Day 5	Creatures of water and air
Day 3	Fertile earth	Day 6	Creatures of the land
Day 7	Rest (Sabbath)		

⁵⁰ Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 27-29.

⁵¹ Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, vol. 1 in *Tyndale OT Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 50.

The wonder of the creation is seen in its comprehensiveness:⁵²

1. Day 1 (Gen. 1.3-5): God makes light, the source of life and truth (cf. Jn. 1.4, 2 Cor. 4.6).
2. Day 2 (vv. 6-8): God makes seas below and above – the clouds are oceans of the skies.
3. Day 3 (vv. 9-13): God makes land and vegetation – self-perpetuating life.
4. Day 4 (vv.14-19): God makes sun, moon, and stars – the glories of outer space.
5. Day 5 (vv. 20-23): God makes sea and sky creatures – from leviathan to the lightning bug.
6. Day 6 (vv. 24-31): God makes land animals, and finally his own image-bearers.

In showing us the order and wonder of creation, the Genesis account reveals our true Creator. Remembering that Genesis was penned by Moses during the Exodus – when the people of God were being led out after 400 years of captivity in a pagan culture – we can see how the text reveals the true God as both Creator and Redeemer. Kline comments:

While the account is indeed a revelation concerning the actual origins of the world, it is primarily a self-disclosure of the Creator himself, an apocalypse of Elohim. Unveiling the cosmic beginnings, it reveals there the glory of the eternal Elohim, the almighty Maker of the heavens and the earth.⁵³

The remarkable combination of the name Yahweh with Elohim in the account of the pre-Fall history in Genesis 2 and 3 is designed as a pointed declaration that Yahweh, the Lord of redemptive history, is Elohim, the Creator-God of Genesis 1.⁵⁴

Further proof of this theological purpose is found in the curiously understated way in which Genesis treats of the creation of sun, moon, and stars: “And God made the two great lights – the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night – and the stars,” (Genesis 4.16). The *ESV Study Bible* draws out the importance of this deliberate understatement:

By referring to them as the greater light and lesser light (v. 16), the text avoids using terms that were also proper names for pagan deities linked to the sun and the moon. Chapter 1 deliberately undermines pagan ideas regarding nature’s being controlled by different deities. (To the ancient pagans of the Near East, the gods were personified in various elements of nature. Thus, in Egyptian texts, the gods Ra and Thoth are personified in the sun and the moon, respectively.)⁵⁵

In other words, it is as Kline said: the biblical account of creation “demythologizes the myth” of Egypt for a people being rescued from a house of physical and spiritual bondage.

A Call to Worship

Before going any further, it is worth pausing to think about the how the realities of creation and redemption call us to worship. Puritan Richard Sibbes expressed it beautifully:

If God had not a communicative, spreading goodness, he would never have created the world. The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost were happy in themselves, and enjoyed one another before the world was. But that God delights to communicate and spread his goodness, there had never been a creation nor a redemption... Oh that we had hearts to make way for such a goodness as God would cast into us, if we were as we should be... Such a goodness is in God as in a fountain, or in the breast that loves to ease itself of milk.⁵⁶

⁵² Ibid., 51-57.

⁵³ Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, 23.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 22.

⁵⁵ *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 50.

⁵⁶ Richard Sibbes, *Works of Richard Sibbes*, vol. 6 (reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1983), 113.

The Imago Dei

What does it mean to say that God made humans “after his own image, in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness?” Herman Bavinck taught that God’s image manifested itself in five distinct areas of human nature:⁵⁷

1. *The human essence.* “[Man] has a spirit (*pneuma*), which was from the beginning organized into a soul (*psychē*).” These terms describe the same essence from different directions, not unlike how we describe light as ‘wave’ and ‘particle’:

Man is “spirit” because he did not, like the animals, come forth from the earth, but had the breath of life breathed into him by God... he received his life-principle from God... because he has a spirit of his own, distinct from the Spirit of God... and because as such he is akin to the angels, can also think spiritual or heavenly things, and if necessary also exist without a body. But man is “soul,” because from the very beginning the spiritual component in him (unlike that of the angels) is adapted to and organized for a body and is bound, also for his intellectual and spiritual life, to the sensory and external faculties; because he can rise to the higher faculties only from a substratum of the lower ones; and hence, because he is a sentient and material being and as such is related to the animals.

2. *Human faculties.* “While the spirit is the principle and the soul the subject of life in man, the heart, according to Scripture, is the *organ* of man’s life” – which then subdivides into the mind and the will:

From the heart flow “the springs of life” (Prov. 4.23). This life, which originates in the heart, then splits into two streams. On the one hand, we must distinguish the life that embraces all impressions, awarenesses, perceptions, observations, thoughts, knowledge, and wisdom. Especially in its higher forms, this central organ of this life is the *mind (nous)*. This life further embodies itself in words and language. On the other hand, the heart is the seat of all the emotions, passions, urges, inclinations, attachments, desires, and decisions of the will, which have to be led by the mind (*nous*) and express themselves in action.

3. *Human virtue.* “The image of God manifests itself in the virtues of knowledge, righteousness, and holiness with which humanity was created from the start”:

Man was not created as a neutral being with morally indifferent powers and potentialities, but immediately physically and ethically mature, with knowledge in the mind, righteousness in the will, holiness in the heart... limited and capable of growth... not for a second conceivable without communion with God.

4. *The human body.* “Man has a ‘spirit’ (*pneuma*), but that ‘spirit’ is psychically organized and must, by virtue of its nature, inhabit a body. It is the essence of humanity to be corporeal and sentient.” This means:

The body is not a prison, but a marvelous piece of art from the hand of God Almighty, and just as constitutive for the essence of humanity as the soul... so integrally and essentially a part of our humanity that, though violently torn from the soul by sin, it will be reunited with it in the resurrection of the dead. The nature of the union of the soul with the body... is so intimate that one nature, one person, one self is the subject of both and of all their activities. It is always the same soul that peers through the eyes, thinks through the brain, grasps with the hands, and walks with the feet.

5. *Human habitation.* The fact that man was originally placed in a perfect paradise signifies that “holiness and blessedness belong together”:

The ethical dimension and the physical dimension, the moral and the natural order in the world, being and appearance, spirit and matter – these many not be opposites. Congruent with a fallen humanity, therefore, is an earth that lies under a curse; a place of darkness therefore awaits the wicked in the hereafter; the righteous will one day walk in the light of God’s countenance; the not-yet-fallen but still earthy man makes his home in a paradise.

⁵⁷ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 554-562.

“In the Space of Six Days”

Having placed the account of creation in its proper historical, theological, and doxological context, we are now in a place to consider the phrase, “in the space of six days.” Though many in our day insist that this phrase was intended to promote a literal interpretation of the days of creation and preclude all other positions, the reality is more nuanced. OPC minister Chad Van Dixhoorn, the world’s leading scholar on the history of the Westminster Assembly writes:

We are told that this world was made ‘in the space of six days; and all very good’. Some of the members of the assembly preferred to state that a little more precisely, saying that God made the world in six twenty-four hour days. But it has always been hard to consider how long a day is, and what a day means, without the presence of a sun or moon. In the end, for some reason, the Westminster assembly decided not to elaborate on the words of Scripture. In spite of the way in which some members specified in their own writings how long those days were, the assembly instead chose to highlight the conclusion of Scripture: that all of God’s creation was ‘very good’.⁵⁸

On the interpretation of length of the days of creation, the OPC permits its ordained officers to embrace either literal or non-literal views, so long as they affirm and articulate certain key points:⁵⁹

1. Creation *ex nihilo*
2. The federal headship of Adam
3. The covenant of works
4. The doctrine of the Sabbath
5. The sufficiency and perspicuity of Scripture
6. The historicity of the creation account
7. The priority of special over general revelation
8. Confessional hermeneutical principles
9. Refutation of the errors of the theory of evolution
10. Affirmation of the covenantal structure of the plan of redemption found in Genesis 1-3

Scripture and Science

A discussion of the length of the days of creation raises an important question: *what is the proper way to conceive of the relationship between Scripture and science – between what we read in Genesis and what scientists derive from observation?* There are four possible answers to this question:

	Incompatible	Compatible
Non-Christian	<p><u>“Hard” Atheism</u></p> <p>The results of modern science demonstrate that biblical claims about the creation of the universe and humanity are completely untenable.</p>	<p><u>“Soft” Atheism / Agnosticism</u></p> <p>The Bible was not intended as a scientific text, but as the “origin story” of the Hebrews. Its claims should be treated as mythological rather than scientific.</p>
Christian	<p><u>Separatist Fundamentalism</u></p> <p>Since at least the days of Charles Darwin, science has more or less categorically sold out to the world and therefore should be regarded with suspicion.</p>	<p><u>Evangelical Concordism</u></p> <p>All truth is God’s truth, therefore there can be no conflict between faithful biblical interpretation and rational scientific inquiry. Believers should engage in the scientific enterprise.</p>

⁵⁸ Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, 61-62.

⁵⁹ “Report of the Committee to Study the Views of Creation,” <http://www.opc.org/GA/creation.html> (accessed December 5, 2016).

Created Age – A Sample Position

This position interprets the days of Genesis as days of ordinary length. It draws its strength from the natural reading of the Genesis text, as well as from the fourth commandment (Ex. 20.8-11) – which appears to assume a natural reading of Genesis 1 as the basis for the Sabbath commandment. Beyond the text of Scripture, the use of a seven-day week from antiquity – even in ancient pagan cultures – seems a compelling external validation.

This position, however, must face the question of how to deal with observable geological age. It does so by making a distinction between *duration* (length of existence measured in actual chronological time) and *maturation* (state of maturity measured by expected chronological requirements). Ever since God created the universe, including time, these two factors always correspond. The present writer is thirty-nine years *old* and physically thirty-nine years *mature*.

Yet at the beginning of creation – when time itself was created – this position holds that these two factors may have differed significantly. Adam may have been thirty-five years mature when he was only a single minute old. Trees in the Garden of Eden would have had rings. This is not “apparent age,” but *created age*. Mountains in the world would have been *created* millions of years old.

This position faces the criticism that it tends to make God into a deceiver. Why did God make the world look old, if it really wasn’t? It makes two answers. First, it points to the fact that God revealed from antiquity a creation account (in Genesis) that, if believed, would make the objection vanish. Second, it suggests that by creating a natural order with built-in history, God provides the data necessary for mankind to learn how that order would subsequently reproduce. By comparing the number of rings in a big tree versus a small tree, man could come to learn how long it would take to grow either.

The point in exploring this position is not to advocate for it. Rather, the point is to demonstrate how even a relatively “young earth” perspective need not necessarily conflict with scientific inquiry.

Important Questions

1. Why is it essential to insist on that God created all things *ex nihilo*?
2. Why is it necessary to insist on the unity of the human race in Adam?
3. If the interpretation of the length of creation days is debatable, why is it still important to insist on the fundamental historicity of the Genesis account?
4. How have Western culture wars – particularly in the United States – ‘weaponized’ the debate over the length of the days of creation?

Additional Resources

OPC, “Report of the Committee to Study the Views of Creation” (www.opc.org/GA/creation.html)

For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 24-26, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
5	18-19	11

Chapter 7: The Fingerprints of God

Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 24-26:

WCF	WLC	WSC
5	18-19	11

Introduction

Shorter Catechism #8 tells us that “God executeth his decrees in the works of creation and providence.” In our last session, we looked at the first of these works – the work of creation. In this session, we turn to God’s works of providence. One of the present author’s seminary professors once said, “Providence is God’s fingerprints.” This helpful image will set the tone for our discussion.

“Do It Again”

One of the best summary definitions of providence is found in WSC 11: “God’s works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions.” Remembering that ‘creatures’ includes both the natural world and all living things, we have here a comprehensive statement that God *actively* sustains and orders the universe. As Scripture testifies, “he upholds the universe by the word of his power,” (Heb. 1.3).

It’s worth pausing to consider how directly this doctrine runs counter to the prevailing spirit of our age. Ever since the European Enlightenment, there has been a strong current of thought in theological circles known as ‘Deism.’ Though Deism may allow for God’s *creative* work, it denies his *sustaining* and *ordering* work. God is compared to a clock-maker who built the universe, wound it up, and then walked away. As Tim Keller points out, such thinking has massive ramifications:

The idea of Deism is that God created the world for our benefit and now it operates on its own, without his constant or direct involvement. This world works like a clock and can be understood scientifically, without any need for divine revelation. In this understanding of things, God exists but becomes someone or something more distant, not someone we can know. Our main responsibility is not to love, worship, and obey him, seeking his forgiveness when we fail to do so. Instead, human beings’ main purpose is to use our reason and free will to support human flourishing. In short, the older Christian idea that we exist for God’s glory receded and was replaced by the belief that God exists to nurture and sustain us.⁶⁰

We may think that we and our churches are immune to such thinking, but none of us remains completely unaffected by the way our society thinks. For instance, how frequently do we consider that even inanimate objects and natural laws play their music under the active direction of the divine conductor? Calvin reminds us:

Concerning inanimate objects we ought to hold that, although each one has by nature been endowed with its own property, yet it does not exercise its own power except in so far as it is directed by God’s ever-present hand. These are, thus, nothing but instruments to which God continually imparts as much effectiveness as he wills, and according to his own purpose bends and turns them to either one action or another.⁶¹

To flesh out this teaching, he cites the example of the sun:

⁶⁰ Timothy J. Keller, *Walking With God Through Pain and Suffering* (New York: Dutton, 2013), 54.

⁶¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.17.2.

No creature has a force more wondrous or glorious than that of the sun. For besides lighting the whole earth with its brightness, how great a thing is it that by its heat it nourishes and quickens all living things! That with its rays it breathes fruitfulness into the earth! That it warms the seeds in the bosom of the earth, draws them forth with budding greenness, increases and strengthens them, nourishes them anew, until they rise up into stalks! That it feeds the plant with continual warmth, until it grows into flower, and from flower into fruit! That then, also, with baking heat it brings the fruit to maturity! That in like manner trees and vines warmed by the sun first put forth buds and leaves, then put forth a flower, and from the flower produce fruit! ... Nothing is more natural than for spring to follow winter; summer, spring; and fall, summer— each in turn. Yet in this series one sees such great and uneven diversity that it readily appears each year, month, and day is governed by a new, a special, providence of God.⁶²

It is, indeed, true that the several kinds of things are moved by a secret impulse of nature, as if they obeyed God's eternal command, and what God has once determined flows on by itself. At this point we may refer to Christ's statement that from the very beginning he and the Father were always at work (John 5.17); and to Paul's teaching that "in him we live, move, and have our being" (Acts 17.28); also, what the author of The Letter to the Hebrews says, meaning to prove the divinity of Christ, that all things are sustained by his mighty command (Heb. 1.3). But they wrongly conceal and obscure by this excuse that special providence which is so declared by sure and clear testimonies of Scripture that it is a wonder anyone can have doubts about it.⁶³

Inanimate objects are not self-existent, nor are natural laws a force unto themselves. Rather, they are instruments in the hands of God. The regularity in these objects and operations neither implies nor requires a lack of personality. G.K. Chesterton put it memorably:

Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, "Do it again"; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, "Do it again" to the sun; and every evening, "Do it again" to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we."⁶⁴

Ordinary and Extraordinary – the Regular and the Miraculous

There are two types of providence in the universe. The first type is called *ordinary* – those operations of providence that God orders "to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently," (WCF 5.2). Calvin's discussion of inanimate objects and the sun falls under this heading. 'Ordinary' here does not mean *lackluster*, but rather *regular*.

Extraordinary providence occurs when God works "without, above, and against [second causes], at His pleasure," (WCF 5.3). Miracles fall into this category, and accordingly we may define a miracle as an *exercise of God's supernatural power executed without recourse to second causes*. Continuing with his discussion of the sun, Calvin points out that God may use it in very different-than-ordinary ways:

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 1.17.4.

⁶⁴ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Image, 2001), 58.

A godly man will not make the sun either the principal or the necessary cause... but merely the instrument that God uses because he so wills; for with no more difficulty he might abandon it, and act through himself. Then when we read that at Joshua's prayers the sun stood still in one degree for two days (Josh. 10.13), and that its shadow went back ten degrees for the sake of King Hezekiah (2 Kings 20.11 or Isa. 38.8), God has witnessed by those few miracles that the sun does not daily rise and set by a blind instinct of nature but that he himself, to renew our remembrance of his fatherly favor toward us, governs its course.⁶⁵

The Schoolroom of Providence

What lessons can we learn from the doctrine of God's providence? Calvin draws four lessons:

1. *We should banish superstition.* "We are superstitiously timid, I say, if whenever creatures threaten us or forcibly terrorize us we become as fearful as if they had some intrinsic power to harm us, or might wound us inadvertently and accidentally, or there were not enough help in God against their harmful acts... Let him, therefore, who would beware of this infidelity ever remember that there is no erratic power, or action, or motion in creatures, but that they are governed by God's secret plan in such a way that nothing happens except what is knowingly and willingly decreed by him... providence means not that by which God idly observes from heaven what takes place on earth, but that by which, as keeper of the keys, he governs all events."⁶⁶
2. *We should seek to live wisely.* "Man's heart plans his way, but the Lord will direct his steps' (Prov. 16.9). This means that we are not at all hindered by God's eternal decrees either from looking ahead for ourselves or from putting all our affairs in order, but always in submission to his will. The reason is obvious. For he who has set the limits to our life has at the same time entrusted to us its care; he has provided means and helps to preserve it; he has also made us able to foresee dangers; that they may not overwhelm us unaware, he has offered precautions and remedies... the Lord has inspired in men the arts of taking counsel and caution, by which to comply with his providence in the preservation of life itself."⁶⁷
3. *In the face of adversity or treachery, we should focus on our Father's good purposes in them.* "If Joseph had stopped to dwell upon his brothers' treachery, he would never have been able to show a brotherly attitude toward them. But since he turned his thoughts to the Lord, forgetting the injustice, he inclined to gentleness and kindness, even to the point of comforting his brothers... If Job had turned his attention to the Chaldeans, by whom he was troubled, he would immediately have been aroused to revenge; but because he at once recognized it as the Lord's work, he comforts himself with this most beautiful thought: "The Lord gave, the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1.21)... To sum this up: when we are unjustly wounded by men, let us overlook their wickedness (which would but worsen our pain and sharpen our minds to revenge), remember to mount up to God, and learn to believe for certain that whatever our enemy has wickedly committed against us was permitted and sent by God's just dispensation."⁶⁸
4. *We should live free of anxieties.* "Innumerable are the evils that beset human life; innumerable, too, the deaths that threaten it... Embark upon a ship, you are one step away from death. Mount a horse, if one foot slips, your life is imperiled. Go through the city streets, you are subject to as many dangers as there are tiles on the roofs. If there is a weapon in your hand or a friend's, harm awaits. All the fierce animals you see are armed for your destruction. But if you try to shut yourself up in a walled garden, seemingly delightful, there a serpent sometimes lies hidden. Your house, continually in danger of fire, threatens in the daytime to impoverish you, at night even to collapse upon you. Your field, since it is exposed to hail, frost, drought, and other calamities, threatens you with barrenness, and hence, famine. I pass over poisonings, ambushes, robberies, open violence, which in part besiege us at home, in part dog us abroad. Amid these tribulations must not man be most miserable, since, but half alive in life, he weakly draws his anxious and languid breath, as if he had a sword perpetually hanging over his neck? ...Yet, when that light of divine providence has once shone upon a godly man, he is then relieved and set free not only from the extreme anxiety and fear that were pressing him before, but from every care. For as he justly dreads fortune, so he fearlessly dares commit himself to God."⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.16.2.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.16.3-4.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.17.4.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.17.8.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.17.10-11.

Evil and Intention

Our standards also give us helpful guidance in dealing with the problem of evil. Biblically, what can we safely say about the existence and exercise of evil in a world in which all things fall out according to the providence of an infinitely and unchangeable good God? Our confession gives us two solid planks. Firstly, we must confess that *God is in control*.⁷⁰ Even when he gives Satan express permission to harass us (see Job 1), he holds the devil's lease and turns the Enemy's malice to ultimate good (see Job 42). Secondly, we must confess that *God is not culpable*. He is neither the author nor the approver of sin.⁷¹

How is this possible? Theologian John Gerstner points to *intention* as the key distinction.⁷² When angels or men commit evil, they do so with the intention of violating the commandments of their Creator. Such actions, whatever the outcome, are sin and liable to everlasting judgment. Nor can we ever justify sinful actions by claiming we intended them for an ultimate good. This is an impossibility for two reasons: 1) we are not omnipotent, and can never guarantee an outcome; and 2) in claiming we should do something God forbids, we are putting ourselves in the place of God – an action which itself is the most basic form of sin. For creatures, therefore, ethics are always governed by the absolute standard of God's moral law.

God's providence, however, intends always to bring about the ultimate magnification of God's glory – his wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth. Since God is omnipotent, the attainment of this goal is always guaranteed. Moreover, since *God is God*, he is perfectly within his rights as our Creator to do with us or to us whatever he pleases for whatever purpose he deems right. His providence is therefore always good – even where it extends “to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men,” (WCF 5.4).

Put another way: for creatures, the end *never* justifies the means; yet for God, the end *always* justifies the means. As Joseph said to his brothers, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today,” (Genesis 50.20). The same event, intended for evil by men, was intended by God for good.

Summarizing the believing response to the philosophical problem of evil, Tim Keller writes: “If you have a God great and transcendent enough to be mad at because he hasn't stopped evil and suffering in the world, then you have (at the same moment) a God great and transcendent enough to have good reasons for allowing it to continue that you can't know. Indeed, you can't have it both ways.”⁷³

What are these good reasons? Our confession lists several in WCF 5.5.

⁷⁰ The proof texts for WCF 5.4 include 2 Samuel 24.1: “Again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, ‘Go, number Israel and Judah.’” Adjacent to this, they include 1 Chronicles 21.1: “Then Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel.” The confession also cites Acts 2.23: “...this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.”

⁷¹ Here the proof texts for WCF 5.4 point to James 1.13-14: “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.” Also 1 John 2.16: “For all that is in the world— the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions— is not from the Father but is from the world.”

⁷² See the discussion of “The Nonproblem of Evil” in John H. Gerstner, *Primitive Theology: the Collected Primers of John H. Gerstner* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1996), 41-49.

⁷³ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 25.

“Behind a Frowning Providence...”

Though the existence of evil may be less of a problem than it first appeared *philosophically*, it is still a monster of a problem *existentially*. When suffering hits our experience, what resources do Christian believers possess? Keller suggests four:

In ancient times, Christianity was widely recognized as having superior resources for facing evil, suffering, and death. In modern times— though it is not as publicly discussed— it continues to have assets for sufferers arguably far more powerful than anything secular culture can offer. Those assets, however, reside in robust, distinctive Christian beliefs.

The first relevant Christian belief is in a personal, wise, infinite, and therefore inscrutable God who controls the affairs of the world— and that is far more comforting than the belief that our lives are in the hands of fickle fate or random chance. The second crucial tenet is that, in Jesus Christ, God came to earth and suffered with and for us sacrificially— and that is far more comforting than the idea that God is remote and uninvolved. The cross also proves that, despite all the inscrutability, God is for us. The third doctrine is that through faith in Christ’s work on the cross, we can have assurance of our salvation... We are assured that the difficulties of life are not payment for our past sins, since Jesus has paid for them. As Luther taught, suffering is unbearable if you aren’t certain that God is for you and with you. Secularity cannot give you that, and religions that provide salvation through virtue and good works cannot give it, either.

The fourth great doctrine is that of the bodily resurrection from the dead for all who believe. This completes the spectrum of our joys and consolations. One of the deepest desires of the human heart is for love without parting. Needless to say, the prospect of the resurrection is far more comforting than the beliefs that death takes you into nothingness or into an impersonal spiritual substance. The resurrection goes beyond the promise of an ethereal, disembodied afterlife. We get our bodies back, in a state of beauty and power that we cannot today imagine. Jesus’ resurrection body was corporeal— it could be touched and embraced, and he ate food. And yet he passed through closed doors and could disappear. This is a material existence, but one beyond the bounds of our imagination. The idea of heaven can be a consolation for suffering, a compensation for the life we have lost. But resurrection is not just consolation— it is restoration. We get it all back— the love, the loved ones, the goods, the beauties of this life— but in new, unimaginable degrees of glory and joy and strength.⁷⁴

With these, Calvin would not disagree. However, he would add one further resource – the Christian belief in a final judicial reckoning. All the wrongs ever done will finally and perfectly put right:

Since we see the pious laden with afflictions by the impious, stricken with unjust acts, overwhelmed with slanders, wounded with abuses and reproaches; while the wicked on the contrary flourish, are prosperous, obtain repose with dignity and that without punishment – we must straightway conclude that there will be another life in which iniquity is to have its punishment, and righteousness is to be given its reward. Furthermore, since we observe that believers are often chastised by the Lord’s rods, we may with full assurance believe that one day the wicked must no less suffer his lash.⁷⁵

Of all these, perhaps the most pastoral is the second – as even Keller admits: “If we again ask the question: ‘Why does God allow evil and suffering to continue?’ and we look at the cross of Jesus, we still do not know what the answer is. However, we now know what the answer isn’t. It can’t be that he doesn’t love us. It can’t be that he is indifferent or detached from our condition. God takes our misery and suffering so seriously that he was willing to take it on himself.”⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Keller, *Walking with God*, 58-59.

⁷⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.10.

⁷⁶ Keller, *Reason for God*, 30-31.

“...He Hides a Smiling Face”

The most fundamental and important ministry to suffering people is our *presence*. Though Job’s three friends began to err as soon as they spoke, they were surely right in their initial response: “They made an appointment together to come to show him sympathy and comfort him. And when they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him. And they raised their voices and wept, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads toward heaven. And they sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great,” (Job 2.11-13). We would do likewise to heed their example. Though we must be very careful in what we speak, we should be ever-ready to be there.

If the Lord gives us an opportunity to speak, we may gently and sympathetically offer suffering brothers and sisters a number of biblical *promises*. We can point them to Jesus’ attitude toward suffering – what he intends to do about it (1 Cor 15.26, Rev. 21.3-4). We may point them to God’s presence in the midst of suffering (Ps. 34.18, 1 Cor 10.13; cf. Dan. 3.24-25). We should confess to them that there may well be life-long mystery about what happens (Dt. 29.29, Is. 55.8-9) – yet we can assure them of God’s good purpose in all trials (Gen. 50.20, 2 Cor 4.16-18, Rom. 8.28). Finally, we may remind them of the proof of who loves them – and to what extent (1 Jn. 4.9-11).

Our confession ends with a reminder that, in midst of his general providence, God exercises a special care for the church (WCF 5.7). Calvin called this the “principal purpose of biblical history”:

The principal purpose of Biblical history is to teach that the Lord watches over the ways of the saints with such great diligence that they do not even stumble over a stone (cf. Ps. 91.12). Therefore... it is important that we recognize this special care toward us. Whence Christ, when he declared that not even a tiny sparrow of little worth falls to earth without the Father’s will (Matt 10.29), immediately applies it in this way: that since we are of greater value than sparrows, we ought to realize that God watches over us with all the closer care (Matt 10.31); and he extends it so far that we may trust that the hairs of our head are numbered (Matt 10.30). What else can we wish for ourselves, if not even one hair can fall from our head without his will? I speak not only concerning mankind; but, because God has chosen the church to be his dwelling place, there is no doubt that he shows by singular proofs his fatherly care in ruling it.⁷⁷

All things are in God’s hands. The hands that hung the stars are the hands that were nailed to the cross – and will someday wipe away every tear from our eyes (Rev. 21.4).

Important Questions

1. In the face of tragedy, is it appropriate to say, “God didn’t do this.”?
2. What lessons have you learned from instances of “frowning providence”? How might they equip you to minister to others?

Additional Resources

Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*.

For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 27-29, 45-46, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
6, 9	21-29, 149	13-19, 82

⁷⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.17.6.

Chapter 8: Paradise Lost

Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 27-29, 45-46:

WCF	WLC	WSC
6, 9	21-29, 149	13-19, 82

Introduction

Rebecca West once summarized the human condition as follows: “If the whole human race lay in one grave, the epitaph on its headstone might well be: ‘It seemed like a good idea at the time.’”⁷⁸ You may also have heard it sardonically said, “I’d be a humanitarian, if it weren’t for people.”

There is a deep-seated problem with humanity. These sections of our standards discuss this problem from both an *anthropological* and a *theological* perspective. As we enter into this discussion, it is worth remembering that sin and ruin are not just a problem with others. To the contrary, “this story is our story. It is *our* first parents that were seduced by the depths of Satan’s subtlety...”⁷⁹

The Devil’s Oldest Trick

WCF 6.1 summarizes the account of humanity’s ruin recorded in Genesis 3. It is worth pausing to consider this passage. In so doing, we might first notice how Adam and Eve missed an important warning sign. “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” asked the serpent (Genesis 3.1). “But how, the narrator expects us to ask, did the snake know anything about God’s command? If he heard that command, why has he so grossly distorted it?”⁸⁰

This passage demonstrates to us the pattern of temptation. First, the command of God is *distorted* – “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat” (Genesis 2.17) becomes “You shall not eat of *any* tree in the garden.” Second, the distorted form of the command is *questioned* – “Did God actually say...?” Third, the Word of God is *denied* – “You will not surely die,” (3.4). And finally, *suspicion* is thrown on God himself – “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God,” (3.5).

How did Adam and Eve ever fall for such a trap? Satan beat us in Eden because he succeeded in getting us to enter into debate on his terms. “The tempter begins with suggestion rather than argument. The incredulous tone... is both disturbing and flattering: it smuggles in the assumption that God’s word is subject to our judgment. The exaggeration... is a further and favourite device: dangled before Eve it will draw her into debate on her opponent’s terms.”⁸¹

Through this, the devil achieved his greatest victory. Sinclair Ferguson explains:

⁷⁸ Cited by Alan Jacobs in *Original Sin: A Cultural History* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 44.

⁷⁹ Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, 83.

⁸⁰ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, vol. 1 in *Word Biblical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 73.

⁸¹ Kidner, *Genesis*, 67.

In Eden the Serpent persuaded Eve and Adam that God was possessed of a narrow and restrictive spirit bordering on the malign.... What was injected into Eve's mind and affections during the conversation with the Serpent was a deep-seated suspicion of God that was soon further twisted into rebellion against him.... what the Serpent accomplished in Eve's mind, affections, and will was a divorce between God's revealed will and his gracious, generous character. Trust in him was transformed into suspicion of him by looking at "naked law" rather than hearing "law from the gracious lips of the heavenly Father." When this distortion of God's character is complete, we inevitably mistrust him; we lose sight of his love and grace; we see him essentially as a forbidding God.⁸²

In aligning with Satan, humanity swallowed "a lie big enough to reinterpret life... a false system... dynamic enough to redirect the flow of affection and ambition... God will henceforth be regarded, consciously or not, as a rival and enemy... presenting divine love as envy, service as servility, and a suicidal plunge as a leap into life."⁸³

What lies at the root of our all of humanity's problems? What was – and what remains – the darkest lie in the universe, coursing deep within the spiritual bloodstream of our race? The devil's oldest trick consists in sowing into our hearts *suspicion of God* – the belief that God cannot be trusted.

The Reign of Terror

In embracing the serpent, Adam and Eve plunged our raced into the threefold ruin explained in WCF 6.2. First, "they fell from their original righteousness and communion with God." The Creator now became a terror: "They now fled from God when he came near them. They hid from the one who came to seek them out... Having given their ears to Satan, they could no longer hear their God without fear."⁸⁴

Next, they "became dead in sin." Satan had said we wouldn't die, and on the surface it seemed he was right – for neither Adam nor Eve dropped dead in the instant. However, "death and decay now entered their bodies and minds, and it was inevitable from that moment they would one day become dust again."⁸⁵

Finally, they became "wholly defiled in all the parts and faculties of soul and body." Like a maniac set loose in our souls with a hot branding iron, self-deception is now seared on our hearts. "God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes," (Ecclesiastes 7.29). "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17.9)

In short, our Edenic rebellion ushered humanity into a reign of terror in which we flee from Author of life, return to dust at death, and in the meantime find ourselves unable to trust anybody – including ourselves.

⁸² Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance – Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 80-83

⁸³ Kidner, *Genesis*, 68.

⁸⁴ Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, 84.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

Autonomy and Total Depravity

The test of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was not about starvation. Every other tree in the garden was available. There was plenty of food to eat. The test was about *trust*. Would Adam and Eve obey God simply because he said so – simply because he is God? The answer was no. Although they knew God was good, they rebelled against him. Having decided that God could not be trusted, they decided to try to play god for themselves. This is the basic sin, the sin beneath all other sins – *an attempt to be your own god*. The theological term for this is *autonomy* – trying to be a law unto yourself, rather than submit to God's. The biblical name for autonomy is 'sin.'

One of the best definitions of sin is found in WSC 14: "Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God." Notice how this definition incorporates the two different ways in which we might sin: by *failing to be or do what God requires*, or *actually doing what God forbids*.⁸⁶

Having become "wholly defiled" (WCF 6.2) by our rebellion, the human race is now "utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil," (WCF 6.4). These expressions refer to what theologians in the Reformation tradition term "total depravity." J.I. Packer explains what it means – and what it does *not* mean:

The phrase *total depravity* is commonly used to make explicit the implications of original sin. It signifies a corruption of our moral and spiritual nature that is total not in degree (for no one is as bad as he or she might be) but in extent. It declares that no part of us is untouched by sin, and therefore no action of ours is as good as it should be, and consequently nothing in us or about us ever appears meritorious in God's eyes. We cannot earn God's favor, no matter what we do; unless grace saves us, we are lost.⁸⁷

But how are Adam's sin and corruption communicated to us? The language in WCF 6.3 is very careful. Adam's *guilt* is said to be "imputed," whereas his *corrupted nature* is said to be "conveyed" to "all their posterity" descended by *ordinary generation*. This paragraph brings out three very important truths.

The first truth is that of *federal headship in God's covenants with man*. Packer again offers a good explanation:

God made the first man the representative for all his posterity, just as he was to make Jesus Christ the representative for all God's elect (Rom. 5.15-19 with 8.29-30; 9.22-26). In each case the representative was to involve those whom he represented in the fruits of his personal actions, whether for good or ill, just as a national leader involves his people in the consequences of his action when, for instance, he declares war.⁸⁸

People raised in Western cultures frequently find this doctrine repellant.⁸⁹ To many of us, it seems unfair that Adam's sin should make us guilty. Two replies may be made.

To begin, we should understand that the difficulty arises from our assumptions. *Behind every hard question is a hidden assumption!* In this case, it is because we assume that humanity is essentially individualistic that we see Adam's federal headship as unfair. But is this a fair assumption?

⁸⁶ These expansions from the *First Catechism*, #30-31.

⁸⁷ J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, 83-84.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 79-80.

⁸⁹ Interestingly enough, Middle Eastern people, with their higher view of family shame and solidarity, have little difficulty grasping the concept of federal headship.

Even Westerners recognize that in some arrangements – such as team sports – the penalties incurred by one player affect the whole team. Those are the rules of the game. But if we understand this principle in matters of sport, why do we object to it in spiritual matters? Is not God, our Creator and ruler, permitted to write the rules of sin so that it, too, is a team sport?

Further, we should note that it is precisely this principle of federal headship that makes our salvation possible. Sin is a team sport – but so is salvation! Just as God ordained a representative for us at the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, so he sent a substitute for us to be nailed to the tree at Calvary. “For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous,” (Rom. 5.19; cf. 1 Cor. 15.22).

The second truth brought out by WCF 6.3 (and WLC 26) is that of *genealogical corruption*. Although the guilt of Adam’s first sin is imputed, the resulting depravity of nature is passed on to us by biological descent. It is from this “original corruption” that “all actual transgressions” proceed (WCF 6.4, WLC 25-26, WSC 18). “From this *state* of sin erupts a *life* of sin.”⁹⁰

Third, note the crucial caveat about “ordinary generation” found in WCF 6.3, WLC 22, and WSC 16. It is precisely because Jesus was *not* born by ordinary generation – but rather by the extraordinary generation of the incarnation and virgin birth – that he became the Second Adam, the only human being since Adam who does not start life with Adam’s guilt or his hard-wired sin nature. It is only as the Second Adam that Jesus is able to answer our sinfulness, both by paying for the “guilt of Adam’s first sin... together with all actual transgressions” at his cross and by supplying in his perfect obedience that obedience which Adam forfeited – the “want of original righteousness.”

As we conclude this section, we should note what the standards say about both the *reality* and *wages* of sin. Though believers have their corrupt nature “through Christ, pardoned and mortified,” its death will not be complete until theirs – or until Jesus returns (WCF 6.5). Likewise, every sin deserves every possible misery (WCF 6.6, WLC 27-29, WSC 19).

Human Freedom and Man’s Fourfold State

What does the fall into sin mean for human freedom? WCF 9.1 describes human freedom as follows: “God hath endued the will of man with that natural liberty, that it is neither forced, nor, by any absolute necessity of nature, determined to good, or evil.” Commenting on this paragraph, Morton Smith writes, “Man’s liberty, therefore, consists in: negatively, the absence of compulsion, and positively... the idea that what we are and do is our own character and our own action.”⁹¹

What exactly does this mean? A.A. Hodge makes an important distinction:

Liberty consists in the power of the agent to will as he pleases, from the fact that the volition is determined only by the character of the agent willing. Ability consists in the power of the agent to change his own subjective state, to make himself prefer what he does not prefer, and to act in a given case in opposition to the coexistent desires and preferences of the agent’s own heart.

Thus man is as truly free since the fall as before it, because he wills as his evil heart pleases. But he has lost all ability to obey the law of God, because his evil heart is not subject to that law, neither can he change it.⁹²

⁹⁰ Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, 90.

⁹¹ Morton H. Smith, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Greenville, SC: GPTS Press, 1994), 288-289.

⁹² A.A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 289.

Hodge’s distinction between ‘liberty’ and ‘ability’ is implied by the language of WCF 9.2, which states, “Man, in his state of innocency, had freedom, and power to will and to do that which was good and well pleasing to God; but yet, mutably, so that he might fall from it.”

We might summarize all this as follows:

1. Human freedom is *not* the power to change our heart’s desires.
2. Human freedom is *not* the power to will contrary to our heart’s desires.
3. Human freedom *is* the power to will according to our heart’s desires.

Why then does God hold man accountable for his thoughts, words, and deeds? *Because these things express who we are.* As Jesus says, “The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks,” (Lk. 6.45). It is not our inability to change that makes us guilty. *It is our free exercise of our corrupt hearts.*

Just as WCF 9.2 describes the state of man’s will “in his state of innocency,” so the rest of WCF 9 describes how the human will changes through regeneration, sanctification, and ultimately glorification. WCF 9.2-5 thus describes “human nature in its fourfold state.”⁹³ We can visualize this information as follows:

WCF	Summary	When	Ability	Liberty	Heart Condition	Proof
9.2	Able to sin (<i>posse peccare</i>)	Before the Fall	Yes	Yes	Changeably Righteous	Eccl. 7.29
9.3	Not able not to sin (<i>non posse non peccare</i>)	After the Fall, Before Regeneration	No	Yes	Life in the Flesh, Cannot Please God	Rom. 3.10-12, Rom. 8.7-8
9.4	Able not to sin (<i>posse non peccare</i>)	After Regeneration, During Sanctification, Before Glorification	No	Yes	Lfe in the Spirit, Able to Please God	Rom. 7.15-25, Gal. 5.17
9.5	Not able to sin (<i>non posse peccare</i>)	After Glorification, For Eternity	No	Yes	Unchangeably Righteous	Heb. 12.23, Jude 24-25

Before moving on to a further discussion of the fall, it is worth pausing to meditate upon two points.

First, we should embrace a *cautious optimism belonging to the regenerate state*. Although sin is still a struggle in the life of believers, WCF 9.4 reminds us that believers are truly free from our “natural bondage under sin.” Our Lord affirmed this when he said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed,” (Jn. 8.34-36). Paul echoes the same sentiment when he writes, “But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.” (Rom. 8.10-11).

This is a point worth remembering in counseling: just as a child has an innate desire to please his parents, so a *regenerate heart has an innate desire to please God*. This desire is one of the chief marks of a converted person (Mt. 5.6), and it is to this desire that shepherds should appeal. To get to the will, we must go through the affections. To get to the affections, we must go through reason. Notice how often the Bible speaks of Paul using reason to get to affections to get to hearts.⁹⁴

⁹³ The Scottish minister Thomas Boston published a very famous book under this exact title in 1720.

⁹⁴ See Acts 17.2,17, 18.4,19, 19.8-9, 24.25

Second, we should consider the *superiority of the state of glory to the state of innocence*:

Christ does not [merely] restore his own to the state of Adam before the fall. He acquired and bestows much more, namely, that which Adam would have received had he not fallen. He positions us not at the beginning but at the end of the journey that Adam had to complete. He accomplished not only the passive but also the active obedience required; he not only delivers us from guilt and punishment, but out of grace immediately grants us the right to eternal life.

Adam, however, did not yet have this high state of blessedness; he did not yet have eternal life... He had the possibility of not erring, sinning, and dying, but not yet the impossibility of erring, sinning, and dying. He still lived in the state of one who could sin and die, and was therefore still in some fear and dread. His was not yet the invariable perfect love that casts out all fear... The image of God therefore had to be fully developed – thereby overcoming and nullifying this possibility of sin and death – and glitter in imperishable glory... Adam was not Christ. The natural was not the spiritual. Paradise was not heaven.⁹⁵

In this same vein, Cornelis Venema describes the life of believers in the world to come:

Believers will stand in the glory of resurrection bodies in the presence of God and all his people, unbowed by the burden of sin's devastation. The God who forgives all the sins of his people, who heals all their diseases (Psa. 103:3) will renew the youth and strength of his people. Believers will know what it is 'to take up wings like eagles' and experience the exhilaration of never growing weary in well doing.⁹⁶

Important Questions

1. How does Adam's starting point (*posse non peccare*) magnify the enormity of the fall?
2. How should the reality of sin and its consequences reshape our expectations and perspective on life in this world?
3. How should the reality of human depravity adjust our attitude toward human reason in all areas of human endeavor? How does it make clearer our need for divine revelation?
4. Why is the biological unity of the human race a theological necessity?
5. Consider the following questions regarding a person caught in sin:
 - a. Is it ever valid for any person caught in sin to say, "I had no *choice*..."?
 - b. Is it ever valid for a non-Christian caught in sin to say, "I cannot *help* it..."?
 - c. Is it ever valid for a Christian caught in sin to say, "I cannot *help* it..."?
6. Is any person *able* to change their own heart (Jn. 6.44, Eph. 2.1-3)? Does any person *desire* it? May any person *excuse* the condition of their heart (Lk. 6.45)?

Additional Resources

Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*

J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*

For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 30-33, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
7	20, 30-35	12, 20

⁹⁵ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 573.

⁹⁶ Cornelis Venema, *The Promise of the Future* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2000), 471.

Chapter 9: The Theory of Everything

Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 30-33

WCF	WLC	WSC
7	20, 30-35	12, 20

Introduction

For decades, theoretical physicists have searched for a “theory of everything” –a model for physics which “fully explains and links together all known physical phenomena, and predicts the outcome of *any* experiment that could be carried out *in principle*.”⁹⁷ Physicist Steven Weinberg describes a “final theory” as “a common starting point... to which all explanations may be traced.”⁹⁸

We might ask a similar question of the Scriptures: is there any unifying concept to describe God’s dealings with humanity? Reformed theology points to the biblical concept of *covenant*. We believe that understanding “covenant theology” is one of the keys in connecting the dots in God’s story.

Covenant Defined

The best definition of ‘covenant’ is found in the children’s catechism:

Q. What is a covenant?

A. A relationship that God establishes with us and guarantees by his word.⁹⁹

Expanding on this, WCF 7.1 states that a covenant is a “voluntary condescension” of God to his creatures in order that they might have “fruition of him as their blessedness and reward.” “Voluntary condescension” means that a covenant is “God sovereignly obligating himself to do certain things for his creatures.”¹⁰⁰

What is involved in a covenant? “Covenants in Scripture are solemn agreements, negotiated or unilaterally imposed, that bind the parties to each other in permanent defined relationships, with specific promises, claims, and obligations on both sides.”¹⁰¹ Covenants always involve *parties* (two or more persons), *terms* (promises, curses, stipulations), and *seals* (signs, ceremonies, sacrifices).

Who determines the terms of a covenant? As Packer notes, the answer depends. When a covenant is made between man and man, the terms of the covenant are *negotiated* (Gen. 21.22-24). Yet when a covenant is made between God and man, all the terms are *imposed* – by God himself (Gen. 15.1-21).

⁹⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theory_of_everything (accessed 10/8/2012).

⁹⁸ Steven Weinberg, *Dreams of a Final Theory: The Search for the Ultimate Laws of Nature* (New York: Vintage Book, 1994), 6.

⁹⁹ *First Catechism*, #24.

¹⁰⁰ Joseph A. Pipa, Jr. “Man in the Covenant of Works, Part 1” in “Man and Sin” (lecture, Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Taylors, SC, Spring 2011).

¹⁰¹ Packer, *Concise Theology*, 87.

But what is the purpose of covenant? Why does God make them? The answer lies in the word ‘fruition’ in WCF 7.1. The word ‘fruition’ is an old word meaning “pleasurable possession.” This connects the notion of covenant back to the chief end of man: God comes down to man in covenant so that man may glorify and enjoy him forever (WSC 1).

How many covenants has God made with man? The biblical answer is two: the *covenant of works* and the *covenant of grace*. Although neither of these titles is found explicitly in the Bible, both are biblically accurate terms. It is to a consideration of each that we now turn.

The Covenant of Works: God’s Gift for Fruition

The covenant of works (CoW) is described for us in WCF 7.2, WLC 20, and WSC 12. Note how WLC 20 distinguishes between God’s *creation ordinances* (labor, marriage, Sabbath) and his *covenant terms*: “...entering into a covenant of life, upon condition of personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience, of which the tree of life was a pledge; and forbidding to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, upon the pain of death.”

One of the important distinctions made by WLC 20 is that between *moral government* and *covenantal government*.¹⁰² What does this mean?

Moral government refers to man’s relationship to God by nature. “The law of nature – the obligation mankind has to worship and serve the Creator – precedes any covenant, both the covenant of works and the covenant of grace.”¹⁰³ God promises man nothing, and man owes God everything. There is no grace in moral government. Man is a *servant*. God was not required to give him anything more.

Yet by condescending love, God added to his moral government his *covenantal government*. Under covenantal government, God held out the possibility that Adam could become a *son*. By his obedience to a specific probationary test, Adam could win justification and confirmation for both himself and his posterity. It is in the CoW, therefore, that God establishes the *principle of representation* and extends the *promise of justification and confirmation*.

We should not miss this. The CoW was not a tripwire intended to ruin mankind. It was a means of bringing mankind to fruition of God. As we have already discussed, the probationary test was essentially a test of trust – a test in which Adam, acting on behalf of us all, failed.¹⁰⁴

The Covenant of Grace: God’s Rescue Plan

The good news of the gospel is that, “God doth not leave all men to perish in the estate of sin and misery, into which they fell by the breach of the first covenant, commonly called the Covenant of Works; but of his mere love and mercy delivereth his elect out of it, and bringeth them into an estate of salvation by the second covenant, commonly called the Covenant of Grace,” (WLC 30).

The covenant of grace (CoG) is God’s plan to fulfill the CoW himself. Just as the CoW was made with Adam and all natural mankind in him, so the CoG “was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed,” (WLC 31). This means that:

¹⁰² The discussion in the next two paragraphs follows Pipa’s discussion in “Man and Sin,” *ibid*. Pipa’s discussion follows the discussion of J.H. Thornwell and R.L. Dabney.

¹⁰³ Paul Helm, “Introduction” in *Reformed Thought: Selected Writings of William Young*, ed. Joel R. Beeke and Ray B. Lanning (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011), 5-6.

¹⁰⁴ See the discussion of “Autonomy & Its Fruits” (WCF 6) in Session 4.

Union between Christ and his people, established in the eternal counsels of God, underlies the atonement and gives it meaning... when Christ died on the cross and rose from the dead, we are really and truly the ones who died and rose with him... when he died, our sin was utterly and definitively dealt with, since Christ died in union with us and we with him. Sin can no longer have dominion over us!¹⁰⁵

The crucial point that must be underlined in all this is that *there is only one plan of salvation – only one way after the Fall for sinners to be right with God*. The CoG began with Adam and Eve immediately after the fall. Its first promise is revealed in Genesis 3.15, when God says to Satan: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” From this starting point, the rest of the Old Testament reveals the unfolding of the CoG through various stages. The final stage of the CoG comes in the New Testament – in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

This does not mean there are no differences in *administration*. WCF 7.5 speaks specifically of the *discontinuity* between OT and NT administrations of the CoG: “under the law it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foreshadowing Christ to come...” What is a ‘type’?

A *type* is a “representative relations which certain persons, events, and institutions of the Old Testament bear to corresponding persons, events, and institutions in the New Testament.”¹⁰⁶ Three rules apply in identifying types. Firstly, there must be a notable, real point of resemblance between the type (OT) and antitype (NT). Secondly, there must be biblical evidence that the type was divinely preordained to resemble the antitype – not an accidental similarity. Thirdly, it must be remembered that a type always prefigures something future.

A.A. Hodge lists the major points of discontinuity between the CoG in the OT versus the NT:¹⁰⁷

Difference	OT	NT
Administrator	Moses the Servant	Christ the Son
Boundaries	National Israel	International Church
Ceremonies	Elaborate & External	Simple & Spiritual
Clarity	Types & Symbols	Clear History & Teaching
Revelation	Partial & Preparatory	Complete & Final

Yet for all the real discontinuity, we should not miss how WCF 7.5 concludes: “...which were for that time sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation.” Despite that believers in the OT had but pictures, promises, and prophecies, God’s Spirit made these things “for that time sufficient and efficacious” so that they really trusted in Jesus Christ – though he had not yet come.

For this reason, WCF 7.6 states, “There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations.” While covenant theology sees different *administrations* of the CoG (WLC 33-35), it insists upon their *essential unity*. Apart from the CoW, all the ‘covenants’ of Scripture are successive chapters unfolding one single CoG.

¹⁰⁵ Robert Letham, *Union with Christ: in Scripture, History, and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2011), 64-65.

¹⁰⁶ Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 144-145.

¹⁰⁷ Hodge, *Confession of Faith*, 130.

The successive administrations of the CoG may be compared to a movie unfolding in phases.¹⁰⁸ The following chart outlines this comparison:

Phase	Story Element	Main Bible Texts	Key Points
Adam	Overall Plot	Genesis 3.15, Genesis 3.21, 4.4	God will provide a Savior who will save by suffering; God establishes blood sacrifices to picture this suffering.
Noah	Setting	Genesis 8.21–9.17	Salvation comes by passing through judgment; God promises to preserve creation until salvation done.
Abraham	Characters	Genesis 12.1–3, Genesis 15.6, Genesis 17	God’s plan will center on a people, place, and promise; The Savior will be born of this people in this place; Salvation comes through believing God’s promise; The seal of the promise is passed on to children.
Moses	Conflict	Exodus 19–20, Deuteronomy 27–28	The people of God become a holy nation; The place where they live is a picture of new creation; Their failure shows that salvation requires a new heart.
David	Hero	2 Samuel 7.8-17; Psalms 2, 72, 110; Psalm 22, Isaiah 53	The fate of God’s people will depend on a King; This King will be both a man and more than a man; This King will save God’s people by bearing God’s wrath.
Prophets	Catastrophe	Hosea 6.7 2 Kings 17, 23-25	Like Adam, Israel breaks God’s covenant; Their faithlessness leads to annihilation and exile...
Christ	Climax	Romans 5.19, Matthew 2.15, Jeremiah 23.5-6; John 3.16, 7.37-39	Jesus is the new Adam, new Israel, and new David; After his resurrection, he pours out his Holy Spirit; The Spirit gives new hearts, faith, and unites us to Jesus; The Spirit equips the church to worship, work, & witness.
New Creation	Happy Ending	Revelation 21.1-7 Revelation 22.1-5	All bad things will finally and forever come untrue; God’s people will dwell with him forever in unending joy.

From the above we see that the relationship of the successive covenants in Scripture is not a relationship of *supplanting* (each covenant *discarding* the former), but rather of *superseding* (each covenant *developing* – embracing and expanding upon – the former). They manifest both a *structural* and a *thematic* unity.¹⁰⁹

Structurally, all the covenant administrations of Scripture are related in their *history*, *genealogy*, and *fulfillment*. Historically, the chain of events and persons linking Adam to Noah to Abraham to Moses to David to Christ is continuous, not disjunctive. Genealogically, God deals with family lines. David and Moses were descendants of the patriarchs, grandsons of Abraham, who was himself a descendant of Noah who was a descendant of Adam. God’s covenants with the ancestors extend to their progeny. In terms of fulfillment, the new covenant made with Christ – a descendent of David – as the second Adam fulfills all previous biblical covenants.

¹⁰⁸ Adapted and expanded from Joseph A. Pipa, Jr. “The Covenant, Part 2” in “Christ and Salvation” (lecture, Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Taylors, SC, September 8, 2010).

¹⁰⁹ The next two paragraphs are the present author’s summary of “The Unity of the Covenants,” the third chapter in Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*.

Successive biblical covenant administrations also manifest *thematic* unity. At the heart of every covenant is the general *Immanuel principle*: God creates and redeems his people in order to give himself to them. The name ‘Immanuel’ in Hebrew literally means “with us – God.” As the CoG unfolds, God condescends to *actively dwell among his people*. This visible presence began with the tabernacle in the wilderness, and eventually expanded to encompass both the Davidic city and the Solomonic temple. Yet its ultimate fulfillment comes not in impersonal constructions, but in *personal incarnation*. The final and full embodiment of the Immanuel principle comes in the person of Jesus Christ, and in union with him all believers become part of God’s temple – in whom God’s Holy Spirit dwells.

The essence of covenant – divine condescension for human fruition – thus forms both the bookends and the unifying concept of Scripture. The divine presence which brought terror to man after the Fall (Gen. 3.8) will sometime eradicate all fear (Rev. 21.3-4). Biblical theology is covenant theology.

Important Questions

1. How does the purpose of covenant and the chief end of man correct inaccurate notions of the purpose of the gospel and human life?
2. Skeptics frequently point to the ‘ethnocentrism’ of OT Israel – God-ordained genocide of the Canaanites, condemnation of interracial marriage, etc. – as proof of the claim that the Old and New Testaments represent two different religions. How does knowledge of the historical progression of the CoG help us develop an answer?
3. Racial supremacists in the church may sometimes point to ‘ethnocentrism’ of the OT to ‘prove’ racial supremacy and forbid interracial marriage. Again, how does knowledge of the historical progression of the CoG help us refute these claims?
4. Dispensationalist Christians claim that God has two different peoples (Israel and the church) and two different purposes in history. Though we recognize them as dear brothers and sisters in Christ, how does knowledge of the unfolding of the CoG correct this error? What is the correct understanding of the relationship between Israel and the church?
5. Is Adam a type of Christ (Rom. 5.14)? Is Rahab’s cord a type of his blood (Josh. 2.18)?

Additional Resources

O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*

For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 34-44, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
8	36-57, 68	21-28

Chapter 10: The God-Man

Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 34-44

WCF	WLC	WSC
8	36-57, 68	21-28

Introduction

God created us to give himself to us, that we might glorify and enjoy him forever. Augustine expressed this in the very first paragraph of his *Confessions*: “you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”¹¹⁰ Yet how can sinners ever *rest* in God? How can we who have inherited Adam’s guilt – and then added to it with mountains of our own sin – ever have peace of conscience such that we could *rest* in a holy and just God?

The answer is the gospel. “For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit,” (Rom. 8.3-4).

The center of the gospel is the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is to this person – and to his great work – that our standards now turn. In this session we will consider Christ’s person, offices, and estates. In the next we will consider the atonement. As we study these things, let us take care to study them not only as *information*, but as *revelation* leading to *adoration*. Here especially it is true that theology ought to lead to doxology. As we learn of Christ, let us delight and be glad in him.

The Person of Christ

The first paragraphs of WCF 8 gather together the biblical data on the person of Christ. Who is Jesus? He is the “only begotten Son... the Mediator between God and man, the Prophet, Priest, and King, the Head and Savior of his Church, the Heir of all things, and Judge of the world,” (WCF 8.1).

To say that Jesus is “the Mediator between God and man” means that he stands between God and man. He can do this because of *who he is* and *what he has accomplished*. Who is Christ? In WCF 8.2 we see “the constitution of the person of the Mediator as the God-man.”¹¹¹

We should note the distinction made in WCF 8.2 between *nature* and *person*. When we speak of a nature, we speak of *essence and attributes*. When we speak of a person, however, we speak of *that which individuates nature*. To use an example, think of *appleness* and *apples*. ‘Appleness’ is the nature of an apple – its flavor, shape, texture, etc. ‘Apples,’ on the other hand, are the individual instances of ‘appleness.’ This is the distinction we have in mind between *nature* and *person*.

With reference to mere humans, there is always a one-to-one correspondence: a human person is *one living instance* of a human nature, comprised of a soul and a body. But with the God-man, things are different. In the case of Jesus, there is a *one-to-two relationship* – one person with two natures.

¹¹⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3.

¹¹¹ A.A. Hodge, *Confession of Faith*, 137.

Pipa explains, “The eternal Son of God is a person with a divine nature. This person took to himself a human nature, not a human person. The human nature became personal only when joined to the divine person.”¹¹²

The Hypostatic Union

The theological term for this union between the divine and human natures in the person of Christ is the *hypostatic union*.¹¹³ Our confession describes this union using some very important terms: “two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion. Which person is very God, and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man,” (WCF 8.2). If we deviate from any one of these distinctions, we fall into heresy. Consider the following:

Heresy (condemned)	Separation	Conversion	Composition	Confusion	Comment
Nestorianism (431)	Y	N	N	N	2 natures, 2 persons, 1 body
Eutychianism (451)	N	Y	N	N	deity absorbed humanity
Apollinarianism (381)	N	N	Y	N	<i>Logos</i> replaces human soul
Monothelitism (681)	N	N	N	Y	2 natures, 1 person, 1 will ¹¹⁴
Orthodoxy	N	N	N	N	WCF 8.2

Remembering the unity of Christ’s person also helps us understand passages like Acts 20.28, in which Paul speaks of “the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” Our confession explains this language thus: “Christ, in the work of mediation, acteth according to both natures, by each nature doing that which is proper to itself: yet, by reason of the unity of the person, that which is proper to one nature is sometimes in Scripture attributed to the person denominated by the other nature,” (WCF 8.7).

On the other hand, our standards are also careful to guard the distinction of natures in the person of Christ. Why? The answer lies in WLC 38-40.

The first of these insists that *the Mediator must be God*. Why? So that “he might sustain and keep the human nature from sinking under the infinite wrath of God, and the power of death; give worth and efficacy to his sufferings, obedience, and intercession; *etc.*” Vos handles some common questions:¹¹⁵

Why could not God, by a miracle, provide a sinless human being, such as Adam was before the fall, to act as Mediator and reconcile us to God?

Even a sinless human being, if merely human, would not have been able to endure the wrath and curse of God as Christ did. It was necessary that the Mediator be God in order to sustain and support his human nature in its temptations and sufferings.

¹¹² Pipa, “Mediator of the Covenant,” in “Christ and Salvation” (lecture, Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Taylors, SC, September 22, 2010).

¹¹³ The word ‘hypostasis’ means *person*.

¹¹⁴ The question of monothelitism is whether the will is part of a *nature* or part of a *person*. Monothelites believed there was only one will in Christ – the divine. The Council of Constantinople in AD 681 condemned monothelitism, determining that there were two wills in Christ – both human and divine – but always acting under the direction of the divine will. This means that Jesus has a real consciousness of his human nature, and yet the self-consciousness of his person is divine. Though always conscious of his humanity, even as a baby Christ was self-conscious of his deity. He always knew that he is the God-man.

¹¹⁵ J.G. Vos, *The Westminster Larger Catechism: A Commentary*, ed. G.I. Williamson (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 91-92.

How could Jesus Christ, who was only one person, “give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45) and bear the penalty for the sins of many people?

If Jesus Christ had been only a human being – even a sinless human being – at most he could have acted as substitute for only one other person... But because Jesus Christ was not only a human being, but also truly divine... His divine nature gave an infinite value to his human nature, so that he could suffer and die for many people at the same time.

WLC 39 goes on to insist that *the Mediator must be man*. Why? In addition to the reasons given in the answer, we ought to consider that this is the only way in which God’s justice could be satisfied. How could Jesus be a true substitute for men, if he himself were not truly man? As the ancient church father Gregory of Nazianzus once said, “that which he has not assumed he has not healed.”

Finally, WLC 40 insists that *the Mediator should be God and man in one person*. Why? So that “the proper works of each nature might be accepted of God for us, and relied on by us, as the works of the whole person.” Again, Vos is helpful:

Why could not God provide two Mediators, one divine and the other human, to accomplish the salvation of his people from sin?

Because the relation between the works of each of the two natures required that these two natures be united in one person. A divine Mediator could not experience suffering except through a human nature; a human Mediator could not endure the required suffering, except as sustained by a divine nature. Therefore it was necessary, not only that the Mediator be God and that he be man, but that both natures be united in one person that his work might be a unity.¹¹⁶

Accomplishment of redemption required the work of two natures. But work is not done by natures, but by a person. Thus we must insist upon one personal Mediator with two complete natures.

The Offices of Christ

As glorious as the incarnation is, incarnation alone cannot redeem man. In order for man to have peace of conscience with God, God’s justice must be satisfied. The Mediator must not only *appear*, he must also *act*. Thus our standards continue from the person of Christ to his work.

Accordingly, WSC 23 speaks of the offices Christ executes. “Christ executeth the offices of a prophet, of a priest, and of a king.” WSC 24-26 explains these offices.

How does Christ execute the office of a prophet? In the OT, he did so by inspiration. Note what is written by the apostle in 1 Peter 1.10-11: “Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories.” In the NT, Christ continues to execute his prophetic office. He did this firstly by incarnation (Jn. 1.18), and then after his resurrection by pouring out his Holy Spirit. The Spirit inspired the NT writers (Jn. 14.26), and indwells every believer (Eph. 1.13).

The primary way in which Christ executes the office of a priest was “in his once offering up of himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice, and reconcile us to God,” (WSC 25). But beyond this, he continues as our advocate before the Father even today (Rom. 8.34, 1 Jn. 2.1). What does it mean to say that he is “making continual intercession for us?” Read WLC 55.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 95.

The third office which Christ executes is that of our King. WSC 26 explains this in summary form, and WLC 45 puts substantial meat on the bones. Christ's kingship is not a paper tiger or a meringue pie in the sky. It is a real dominion exercised through his proclaimed Word, his powerful Spirit, his church officers and ordinances, and his particular providences – toward both friend and foe.

How easy is it to slip into serious – even deadly – error by neglecting one or more of Christ's offices?

Prophet	Priest	King	Result	Verdict
Y	Y	Y	Christianity	Is. 33.22
Y	Y	N	Antinomianism	1Jn. 2.3-6
Y	N	Y	Moralism	Rom. 3.10
Y	N	N	Intellectualism	Jas. 2.19
N	Y	Y	Emotionalism	2Tim 3.16-17
N	Y	N	Mysticism	2Tim 4.3-4
N	N	Y	Legalism	Rom. 3.28
N	N	N	Paganism	Rom. 1.18-21

The Humiliation of Christ

WSC 23 speaks of Christ executing his offices “both in his estate of humiliation and exaltation.” Notice the structure here. Our Lord fulfills all three offices in both of his estates. He was prophet to us during his earthly ministry (humiliation), and remains prophet to us today during his heavenly reign (exaltation). The same is true of his priestly and kingly offices.

Christ's humiliation is summarized in WSC 27, and expanded upon in WLC 46-50. There are several things worth noting in the latter.

Firstly, notice the expression “emptying himself of his glory,” (WLC 46). This is what Paul means when he writes in Philippians 2.6-7 that Christ, “though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.” When was the last time we paused simply to wonder at this, that the God of infinite glory was willing to veil it – when doing so guaranteed that he would be despised, scorned, unrecognized by most, and ultimately murdered? Why did he do it? For us.

Secondly, note what WLC 47 records about Jesus being “made of a woman of low estate, and... born of her; with divers circumstances of more than ordinary abasement.” The last proof text cited is Luke 2.7: “And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.” Is it not a striking thing to imagine the King of glory, born in a barn – surrounded by the cold, filth, and noise? But go on to Luke 2.22-24, and note the offering brought by Jesus' parents: “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.” The cross-reference here points us to Leviticus 12.8, where we are told that the birds were the offering brought by the poor who could not afford a lamb. Again, is this not striking – the one who owns “the cattle on a thousand hills” reduced to abject poverty? Again, why? Again, *for us*.

We might profitably dwell upon these things at some length. Though we are used to living in and breathing the fetid air of a world ravaged by sin, the eternal Son of God was not. Yet he did, for our sakes – all the while buffeted by natural infirmities and infernal enemies (WLC 48). Though we all deserve death, Jesus did not. Yet he died. Though we fear death as unknown, he faced it knowing full well what it would mean to bear “the weight of God's wrath.” The pain he suffered when the Father turned away from him in abhorrence and wrath (Mk. 15.34, Ps. 22.1, Hab. 1.13) must have been something like that of an eternal, perfect marriage turned to sudden divorce. And yet he went to the cross. Why? As the Nicene Creed states, “For us men for our salvation.” Do we dwell on this?

Speaking of the creeds of the church, we might also note how WLC 50 explains the expression “he descended into hell” from the Apostles’ Creed. Rather than see it as Jesus visiting the abode of the damned, our standards understand this expression to refer to the burial of his body until the third day. Though this may give us pause at first glance, it is consistent with Jesus’ own words to the penitent thief in Luke 23.43, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” Vos again offers a helpful note:

The word translated ‘hell’ in the Apostles’ Creed is not Gehenna (the place of punishment) but Hades (the realm of death). Our catechism teaches that the words “He descended into hell” refer to Christ’s being buried, and continuing under the power of death for a time, the word *hell* being understood as “the realm and power of death.”¹¹⁷

The pastoral implications of this expression are explained by *The Heidelberg Catechism*:

Q. 44: Why does the creed add, “he descended into hell”?

A. To assure me in times of personal crisis and temptation that Christ my Lord, by suffering unspeakable anguish, pain, and terror of soul, especially on the cross but also earlier, has delivered me from the anguish and torment of hell.

We all experience seasons of dryness in our affection for Christ. In such times, we would do well to ponder his humiliation – to remember what he suffered for us, and from what he saved us.

The Exaltation of Christ

The last topic we consider in this session is Christ’s exaltation (WLC 51-56). What does Christ’s resurrection and ascension mean for believers?

By his resurrection Jesus “declared himself to be the Son of God,” (WLC 52). In Deuteronomy 18.20-22 God declared that false prophets would die, and that the proof of a prophet was in the pudding of his predictions. Jesus claimed to be God (Jn. 8.58, 10.30, 14.9) and foretold his resurrection (Mk. 8.31, 9.31, 10.34). The reality of the latter vindicates the former. He really is the Son of God, and everything he tells us is true.

Jesus’ resurrection also declares that he “satisfied divine justice,” (WLC 52). Paul makes it clear that without the literal resurrection, there is literally no forgiveness of sins or life everlasting (1 Cor 15.13-18). But why did Jesus have to rise to prove divine justice satisfied? Paul does not state it explicitly, but we may infer it: if Jesus had *not* risen, then the guilt of sin was too great to be liquidated by his righteous sacrifice. Thanks be to God it was not – that he lives! Vos writes, “the penalty for sin had been completely paid and canceled; therefore death had lost its claim on him.”¹¹⁸

Thirdly, Jesus’ resurrection is a promise to believers “to assure them of their resurrection from the death at the last day.” See Romans 6.5 and 1 Corinthians 15.20-26.

Before concluding this session, consider WLC 54. What does the answer to this question tell us? It tells us that Christ, currently seated at the Father’s right hand, is doing. The Father’s right hand is a place of authority and power, and from it our glorious King prosecutes his conquest of the nations. He is not vacationing until his return. He is reigning. And as he reigns, he intercedes for us:

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 113.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 115.

Christ maketh intercession, by his appearing in our nature continually before the Father in heaven, in the merit of his obedience and sacrifice on earth, declaring his will to have it applied to all believers; answering all accusations against them, and procuring for them quiet of conscience, notwithstanding daily failings, access with boldness to the throne of grace, and acceptance of their persons and services. (WLC 55)

What an amazing thing – to believe that even now, *this very moment*, Jesus sits in heaven “declaring his will to have [the merit of his obedience and sacrifice] applied to all believers; answering all accusations against [us], and procuring for [us] quiet of conscience...” Praise his name!

Important Questions

1. Why must we insist upon an orthodox understanding of Christ’s person – that in the one person of Christ there are two natures without *separation, conversion, composition, or confusion*? What is at stake if we fudge?
2. Hebrews 4.15 tells us that Jesus “in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” Could Jesus have sinned (see footnote 117)?
3. If Jesus never sinned, how can he truly “sympathize with our weaknesses,” (Heb. 4.15)?
4. Which office(s) of Christ is/are most commonly denied in the broader church in our community? Which office(s) is/are most commonly denied in the Reformed church?
5. A brother or sister in the congregation confesses to you that, in the midst of various outward trials – some of them prolonged and severe – they are finding it hard to feel love toward Christ. What questions would you ask of this person? How would you counsel them?
6. What comforts can we derive from the humiliation of Christ? From his exaltation?
7. Given what the resurrection proves about all of Jesus’ claims, where is the best place to start with an unbeliever skeptical about the claims of Christ?

If Jesus is the Son of God, then we have to take his teaching seriously, including his confidence in the authority of the whole Bible. If he is not who he says he is, why should we care what the Bible says about anything else? Think of it like this. If you dive into the shallow end of the Biblical pool, where there are many controversies over interpretation, you may get scraped up. But if you dive into the center of the Biblical pool, where there is consensus—about the deity of Christ, his death and resurrection—you will be safe. It is therefore important to consider the Bible’s core claims about who Jesus is and whether he rose from the dead before you reject it for its less central and more controversial teachings.¹¹⁹

Additional Resources

Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick
J.G. Vos, *The Westminster Larger Catechism: A Commentary*

For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 34-44 (*review*). We will consider what this section teaches about the atonement:

WCF	WLC	WSC
8	36-57, 68	21-28

¹¹⁹ Keller, *Reason for God*, 113.

Chapter 11: The Atonement

Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 34-44

WCF	WLC	WSC
8	36-57, 68	21-28

Introduction

In the last session, we studied the person, offices, and estates of our Lord Jesus Christ. In this session, we turn to study the *atonement*. Atonement “means making amends, blotting out the offense, and giving satisfaction for wrong done; thus reconciling to oneself the alienated other and restoring the disrupted relationship.”¹²⁰ This is what our Lord did to accomplish our salvation.

How important is it for us to understand properly the doctrine of the atonement? “The centrality of the atonement to Christianity has influenced our language, giving us the word ‘crucial’ which means literally ‘pertaining to a cross’. When we say that anything is crucial we are saying that it is as central to that to which we apply it as the cross is to Christianity. What Christ did on the cross is the heart of the Christian faith. The atonement is critical; it is the central doctrine of Christianity.”¹²¹

Terminology

Our standards use several terms to describe Christ’s work. WCF 8.5 speaks of his “obedience and sacrifice,” which “hath fully satisfied” (*propitiated*) God’s justice, purchasing ‘reconciliation’. WCF 8.6 speaks of the “work of redemption.” We can briefly define each of these terms as follows:

Term	Example	Defined
Obedience	Romans 5.19	An umbrella term (<i>see next section</i>)
Sacrifice	Ephesians 5.2, Hebrews 10.11-12	That which is given up to/for another
Propitiation	Romans 3.25, Hebrews 2.17	That which averts wrath by <i>expiating</i> guilt (<i>see below</i>)
Reconciliation	Romans 5.10-11, 2 Corinthians 5.20-21	Removal of the alienation between God and man
Redemption	Galatians 4.4-5, Ephesians 1.7	“To ransom by the payment of a price” ¹²²

The term ‘propitiation’ includes another concept known ‘expiation.’ The former refers to God, the latter to believers. Expiation means Christ’s work *takes away our guilt*. Propitiation means Christ’s work *turns away God’s wrath* by taking away our guilt.

All of the above terms converge at the cross of Jesus Christ. “As a perfect *sacrifice* for sin... Christ’s death was our *redemption*... Christ’s death was God’s act of *reconciling* us to himself, overcoming his own hostility that our sins provoked... The cross *propitiated* God (i.e., quenched his wrath against us by *expiating* our sins and so removing them from his sight.”¹²³

¹²⁰ Packer, *Concise Theology*, 134.

¹²¹ Leon Morris, “Atonement,” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J.I. Packer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 54.

¹²² John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 115.

¹²³ Packer, *Concise Theology*, 135 (emphasis added).

The Obedience of Christ

The umbrella term 'obedience' is used of Christ in two distinct senses. Theologians refer to these senses as Christ's *active* and *passive* obedience. What is the difference? Christ's active obedience means he obeyed all the positive requirements of God's law. His passive obedience means that he suffered the full penalty for our violations of God's law.

Why must we both distinguish and insist on both aspects of Christ's obedience? John Murray explains:

The law of God has both penal sanctions and positive demands. It demands not only the full discharge of its precepts but also the infliction of penalty for all infractions and shortcomings. It is this twofold demand of the law of God which is taken into account when we speak of the active and passive obedience of Christ. Christ as the vicar of his people came under the curse and condemnation due to sin and he also fulfilled the law of God in all its positive requirements. In other words, he took care of the guilt of sin and perfectly fulfilled the demands of righteousness. He perfectly met both the penal and the preceptive requirements of God's law.¹²⁴

The two aspects of Christ's correspond exactly to our twofold need as covenant-breakers. "As the Second Adam he satisfied all the conditions of the broken covenant of works, as left by the first Adam... He suffered the penalty of transgression... He rendered the obedience which was the condition of 'life.'"¹²⁵

Before leaving consideration of the obedience of Christ, there is a final area on which we ought to touch. This area is the *progressive* obedience of Christ, alluded to in Luke 2.52: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man." It is alluded to again in Hebrews 5.8: "Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered."

What does it mean to say that Jesus *increased* in favor with God and *learned* obedience? Smith explains: "To say that the obedience was progressive is not to suggest that there was any disobedience at any point. His obedience at every stage of life was perfect, but as he grew the demands of God became more and more extensive, until finally he was confronted with the demand of death."¹²⁶

The Nature, Extent, & Necessity of the Atonement

The view of the atonement taught by the Bible and our standards is that of *penal substitution*. The key phrases on this point are "the justice of his Father" (WCF 8.5) and "divine justice," (WSC 25). As we have noted already with respect to his obedience, the Lord Jesus died to satisfy the justice of his Father – to bear the *penalty* incurred by breaking the law of God.

But for whom did Christ live and die? WCF 8.5 says he offered himself "for all those whom the Father has given unto Him." Although his obedience is of *infinite worth*, it is of *limited application*. Jesus lived and died as a substitute only on behalf of the elect. Note how in John 17.2 he speaks of giving eternal life "to all whom you [God the Father] have given him," and again in 17.9 how he explicitly states, "I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours."

¹²⁴ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1955), 21-22.

¹²⁵ A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 401.

¹²⁶ Smith, *Systematic Theology*, I.378.

This view of a *limited atonement*, so far from making God unjust, actually guards and upholds the justice of God. The Bible is clear that Jesus' work was *substitutionary* (2 Cor 5.21). But if Jesus was the substitute for all men, how could God consign any to hell? In such a case the lost in hell would be repaying a debt that Christ has already satisfied! The only logical conclusion to draw that is consonant with the justice of God is that Jesus did *not* act as a substitute for all.

There are, of course, alternative (erroneous) theories of the atonement. The "moral influence theory" states "that the death of Christ was to exert a moral influence upon man. Christ, by his death, was setting a great example for me in being willing to give up his life for the truth. Or, Christ shows us real love by his death, and calls us to follow his example. No idea of expiation or satisfaction is involved in this theory."¹²⁷ Another alternative theory of the atonement is the "governmental theory." Smith explains:

This theory was set forth by Grotius during the Arminian controversies in the Netherlands. He asserted that the moral government of God must be maintained by God. God must demonstrate his right to punish the sinner. It is not the satisfaction of God's justice, but rather the exhibition of God's displeasure with sin. God's mercy and grace permit him to forgive sin and cancel the debt without any satisfaction, but lest he encourage man in his sin, he demonstrates his wrath against sin in the death of Christ.¹²⁸

The trouble with both of these theories is not that they contain *no* element of truth. Jesus does call us to follow his example (Mk. 8.34-37), and the cross does manifest God's wrath on sin (Rom. 3.25-26). Yet by eliminating the key elements of penal satisfaction and personal substitution, both theories leave man's guilt intact. Moreover, if there is no satisfaction and substitution – if our sins were not personally imputed to Jesus at the cross – then why did he have to die? How is his death a just death? How is justice vindicated, if the public example bore no guilt? In such a scenario, the cross would be "not a show of righteousness and justice, but of the grossest injustice."¹²⁹

The cross was not just an example, whether moral or judicial. It was a *consequent absolute necessity*. "God's decree to save was a free and sovereign decree. Once he had so decreed, then there was an inherent necessity that required the salvation be wrought by the satisfaction of God's justice through the shedding of blood, which could only be accomplished by one who was both God and man."¹³⁰ Our Lord's prayers in Gethsemane indicate this truth: there simply was no other way. Once God had determined to save, the cross was inevitable.

The Perfection of the Atonement

When our confession says that Christ "has fully satisfied" God's justice, it speaks of the perfection of the atonement. Theologian John Murray describes this perfection under four headings. His explanation is worth our reflection.

First, the atonement is perfect in its *historical objectivity*. "In the atonement something was accomplished once for all, without any participation or contribution on our part... The atonement is objective to us, performed independently of us.... the atonement was made in human nature and at a particular season in the past and finished calendar of events... History with its fixed appointments and well-defined periods has significance in the drama of divine accomplishment."¹³¹

¹²⁷ Smith, *Systematic Theology*, I.369.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 370.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 374.

¹³¹ Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 52-53.

Second, the atonement is perfect in its *finality*. “The atonement is a completed work, never repeated and unrepeatable.”¹³² Third, the atonement is perfect in its *uniqueness*. Here Murray quotes Hugh Martin: “It is one solitary, matchless, Divine *transaction* – never to be repeated, never to be equaled, never to be approached.”¹³³ Finally, the atonement is perfect in its *intrinsic efficacy*. “Christ discharged the debt of sin. He bore our sins and purged them. He did not make a token payment which God accepts in place of the whole. Our debts are not cancelled; they are liquidated.”¹³⁴

The Effects of the Atonement

The last thing we want to consider are the effects brought to bear upon the life of believers by the atonement. Here again, Murray’s discussion is helpful.¹³⁵

How does redemption change our relationship to the law? Redemption does *not* free us from the obligation to love God and our neighbor. However, it *does* free us from the *curse* of the law, the *ceremonies* of the law, and the *conditions* of the law “*as the condition of our justification and acceptance with God.*”¹³⁶

How does it change our relationship to sin? Redemption frees us from the *guilt* of sin, the *power* of sin, and the *fear* of death. Most believers would confess that all three of these are (much) easier said than done. Nevertheless, our confession affirms that “To all those for whom Christ hath purchased redemption, He doth certainly and effectually apply and communicate the same... overcoming all their enemies by his almighty power and wisdom, in such manner, and ways, as are most consonant to his wonderful and unsearchable dispensation,” (WCF 8.8).

Important Questions

1. Which view of the atonement is most common among mainline churches in our age?
2. Many Christians affirm that the atonement was both substitutionary in nature and universal in extent. While we may and should appreciate their intentions, is their position consistent?
3. In his 2007 novel *The Shack*, William Young has ‘God’ say to the main character, “I don’t need to punish people for sin. Sin is its own punishment, devouring you from the inside.”¹³⁷ Is any portion of this statement biblical? What portion is unbiblical?

Additional Resources

Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*

For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 47-49, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
10	57-60, 67-68	29-32

¹³² Ibid., 53. See John 19.30 and Hebrews 10.5-14.

¹³³ Ibid., 57.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 58.

¹³⁵ The paragraphs in this section summarize Murray’s discussion in *ibid.*, 43-50.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 45 (emphasis in the original)

¹³⁷ William P. Young, *The Shack* (Newbury Park, CA: Windblown Media, 2007), 120

Chapter 12: Changed Forever

Readings

Montgomery, "The Flowchart of Gospel Transformation" (Appendix 2)
Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 47-49

WCF	WLC	WSC
10	57-60, 67-68	29-32

Introduction

Up to this point, we have been dealing with what theologians call the *historia salutis* – the history of salvation. But beginning with this section in our standards, we will deal with what theologians refer to as the *ordo salutis* – the order of salvation. The distinction is embedded in the title of John Murray's book *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*. Redemption is accomplished in history (*historia salutis*). But it is then applied to us personally (*ordo salutis*).

How important is it for us to understand redemption applied? John Calvin writes, "As long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us."¹³⁸ *Historia* without *ordo* is of no benefit to us:

Electricity lines may go past a house, but to benefit from the electricity supply, the house must be connected to the lines.... To be united to Christ, we need to be connected to Christ by the Holy Spirit through faith. There are two linked realities here. Without the electricity surging through the grid, the house could have no benefit, even if the wires were connected.¹³⁹

Therefore the basic question we will be investigating from this point forward is this: *how does God take his saving acts in history and apply them to us personally?* How are we changed forever?

Aspects of Conversion

The title of this chapter in our confession is "Of Effectual Calling." This uncommon phrase is defined in WSC 31, WLC 67, and WCF 10.1. J.I. Packer helpfully unpacks the latter:

What is being spoken here is the many-sided reality of Christian conversion, involving illumination, regeneration, faith, and repentance. It is being analyzed as a sovereign work of God, "effectually" (i.e., effectively) performed by the power of the Holy Spirit. The concept corresponds to Paul's use of the verb *call* (meaning "bring to faith") and *called* (meaning "converted")... and contrasts with the idea of a merely external and ineffective invitation, as found in Matthew 22.14.¹⁴⁰

Thus our standards use the phrase "effectual calling" as an umbrella term to refer to the various aspects of conversion.

¹³⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.1.

¹³⁹ Letham, *Union with Christ*, 42.

¹⁴⁰ Packer, *Concise Theology*, 152-153. As examples of Scriptures speaking of effectual calling, Packer cites Rom 1.6, 8.28,30, 9.24; 1Cor 1.24,26, 7.18,21; Gal. 1.15; Eph. 4.1,4; 2 Th. 2.14.

The Partakers of Redemption

“Who are made partakers of redemption through Christ?” asks WLC 59. The answer given is “all those for whom Christ hath purchased it.” WCF 10.1 is more specific: “All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, He is pleased, in His appointed and accepted time, effectually to call.” The proof text cited is Romans 8.30: “And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.”

The Scriptures thus distinguish between *general* and *effectual calling*: “For many are called, but few are chosen,” (Mt. 22.14). God sincerely offers Christ to all who will come: “let the one who desires take the water of life without price,” (Rev. 22.17). At the same time, Christ himself tells us, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him,” (Jn. 6.44). It is the elect only “who are in time by the Holy Ghost enabled to believe in Christ according to the gospel,” (WLC 59).

Having laid out this general principle, our standards go on to speak of more specifically difficult cases. What of infants who die in infancy? What of the mentally handicapped? What of those who dwell in lands to which the gospel has never come?

WCF 10.3 addresses the case of infants and the mentally handicapped in two ways. Firstly, it affirms is that in such cases, as in all others, salvation is only through the accomplished work of Christ personally applied by the Holy Spirit, “who worketh when, and where, and how He pleaseth.” The gospel is exclusive, and there are no exceptions. Secondly, it pushes the question back onto the only sure hope there is for anybody: the electing love of God. If a person is chosen by God for eternal life, then that person will be saved by Christ through the Spirit. *How* it happens may be a mystery to us; but *that* it happens is not.

Yet all this leaves unanswered one very burning question: how many infants and handicapped are included among the elect? On this question significant figures in the Reformed tradition differ. A.A. Hodge is optimistic that all infants who die in infancy are elect:

The phrase “elect infants” is precise and fit for its purpose. It is not intended to suggest that there are any infants not elect, but simply to point out the facts – (1.) That all infants are born under righteous condemnation; and (2.) That no infant has any claim in itself to salvation; and hence (3.) The salvation of each infant, precisely as the salvation of every adult, must have its absolute ground in the *sovereign election of God*. This would be just as true if all adults were elected, as it is now that only some adults are elected. It is, therefore, just as true, although we have good reason to believe that *all* infants are elected.¹⁴¹

Others in the Reformed tradition believe that Hodge’s optimism goes beyond what Scripture states. Scripture does offer us three significant comforts. First, it tells us that our God deals with families; he is a God of covenant. He makes claims on, and extends promises to, both believers and their children (Gen. 17.7-10, Acts 2.38-39). Second, Scripture infers in at least two places that such “covenant children” who died – or were murdered – belonged to him (2 Sam. 12.23, Ezk. 16.20-21). Third, it tells us that Jesus welcomed children (Mk. 10.14).

Yet at the same time, Scripture also shows us that many children were included among those swept away in God’s mighty acts of judgment – both in the Flood (Gen. 7.21) and in the conquest of Canaan (Josh. 6.21). Even within the covenant community, judgment for rebellion fell on both parents and children (Num. 16.25-35).

¹⁴¹ Hodge, *Confession of Faith*, 174-175.

From this data, the present author believes we may safely affirm two things. First, that the infants or handicapped offspring of *professing Christians* are included among the elect. Second, that those who lose infants or handicapped offspring prior to becoming Christians may also believe that their children who predeceased them are included among the elect – since God elects in eternity past. But to those who persist in rejecting the free offer of the gospel, can we really extend any comfort? It is *possible* that God may elect their infants and invalids? It is. But it is *promised* in Scripture?

WCF 10.4 addresses two other cases of special import. The first is of those who apostatize. Here the confession affirms that people may well be “called by the ministry of the Word, and may have some common operations of the Spirit, yet they never truly come unto Christ.” The proof texts cited include the “rocky ground” hearer in the parable of the sower, as well as the difficult Hebrews 6.4-5.

The second case handled in WCF 10.4 (and WLC 60) is that of people who have never heard the gospel – the oft-mentioned “native in the jungle.” Here our standards are clear: the honest pagan is still a pagan and so *cannot be saved through paganism*, regardless of whether they are “diligent to frame their lives according to the light of nature, or the laws of that religion which they profess.” In situations where age or disability is not a factor, *God always brings his elect into personal contact with saving revelation.*

How he does this may be mysterious and surprising – examples from Scripture include Ruth (Ruth 1.16), Naaman (2 Kings 5), and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8). *Where, when, and to whom* he has done this may include places, times, and persons of which history will remain ignorant until the resurrection. But *that* this is how God saves is irrefutable: “This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved,” (Acts 4.11-12).

The Work of the Holy Spirit

Having discussed *who* are made partakers of redemption, it is well that we turn to consider *how* redemption is applied. WSC 29-30 and WLC 58 tell us the application of redemption is “the work especially of the Holy Ghost,” who does it “by working faith in us.” WCF 10.1 explains that this work involves “enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God; taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them a heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and, by His almighty power determining them to that which is good; and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ; yet so as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace.” What is in view here is what Packer referred to as *illumination* and *regeneration*.

Illumination “is not a giving of new revelation, but a work within us that enables us to grasp and to love the revelation that is there before us in the biblical text.” Though a lifelong experience, it “starts before conversion with a growing grasp of the truth about Jesus and a growing sense of being measured and exposed by it.”¹⁴² One thinks of Acts 16.14: “One who heard us was a woman named Lydia... The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.”

Regeneration is the concept “of God renovating the heart, the core of a person’s being, by implanting a new principle of desire, purpose, and action, a dispositional dynamic that finds expression in positive response to the gospel and its Christ.”¹⁴³ The primary texts here are Ezekiel 36.25-27 and John 3.1-15.

¹⁴² Packer, *Concise Theology*, 155.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 157.

Can there be regeneration without conversion? Packer cites several verses in support of the conclusion that this is impossible. 1 John 3.9 is especially worth consideration: “No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God.” This verse makes an identification between those “born of God” and those in whom “God’s seed abides.” But God’s seed does not abide in the unconverted. Therefore, whatever other considerations might posit the possibility of regeneration without conversion, this verse offers compelling substantiation to Packer’s conclusion: “It thus appears that as there is no conversion without new birth, so there is no new birth without conversion.”¹⁴⁴

Changed Forever – Union with Christ

Conversion brings us into personal, permanent, spiritual union with Christ. One of the key metaphors used in Scripture to explain this change is that of a vine and branches: “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing,” (Jn. 15.5). The ‘vine’ was an Old Testament image for the people of Israel (Ps. 80.8-9) – a symbol of their experience and identity. By taking up this symbol and referring to himself as “the true vine,” Jesus tells his disciples that a living connection to him changes us forever.

Union with Christ changes our experience by bringing us into a new relationship. Like any healthy relationship, our relationship with Jesus has five aspects. First, we enjoy his *presence* through the indwelling of his Spirit (Jn. 14.23-25). Second, we *trust* him – through believing his words we are made clean (Jn. 15.3). Third, we *communicate* with him – he speaks to us in Scripture, and we speak to him in prayer (Jn. 15.7). Fourth, we receive the *affection* of both Father and Son (Jn. 14.23, 15.9). Finally, we *serve* him because he first served us (Jn. 14.15, 15.10).

But union with Christ does not simply change our experience. It also changes our identity. We will conclude this session by reflecting upon this new identity...

Gospel Identity¹⁴⁵

Identity controls destiny. Whether we realize it or not, each of us spends our life acting like a novelist: selecting courses of action (our plot) for our main character (ourselves) based on who we think that character is. It is here, at this central narrative of our existence, that the gospel meets us. The gospel of Jesus Christ is *an identity, defined by a destiny, that overflows into activity.*

The Gospel is an Identity

“For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive,” (1 Cor. 15.11). The key word in both parts of this sentence is ‘in.’ It is shorthand for “in union with.” All humanity starts out in union with Adam. We are *identified* with Adam, and we face the consequences of his rebellion against God.

But the gospel offers us something better than the old identity in union with Adam. It offers us union with Christ. Union with Christ is a central concept in the New Testament. Theologian John Murray wrote, “Nothing is more central or basic than union and communion with Christ.... Union with Christ is really the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation.”¹⁴⁶ Is this an exaggeration? We are to consider: how often does the Apostle Paul speak of being “in Christ Jesus”, “in him,” etc.?

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 158.

¹⁴⁵ This section has been published as a separate article available at: <http://resurrectionopc.org/discipleship/>.

¹⁴⁶ Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 161.

Union with Christ connects us to the work of Christ. Supernaturally conceived and born of a virgin, Jesus Christ is the only son of Adam who is also the Son of God. As such, he alone did not inherit Adam's guilt or corruption. On the contrary, he was perfect: in his birth, life, crucifixion, and resurrection. As such, Jesus was uniquely qualified to rescue rebels *and restart the human line*. How so? Because Jesus is God, his work is of infinite value. And because he is also a perfect man, his life and death provide something unique: a substitute record that can count for others.

How can the work of Jesus, now over two millennia past, count for people today? The answer is that God, in eternity past, elected *in advance* those whom Jesus would represent (WLC 31). And just as a team captain scores goals *for his team*, so Christ's life and death accomplished salvation for God's elect.¹⁴⁷ Yet this decretal union does not become an existential union¹⁴⁸ – redemption accomplished does not become redemption applied – until we are *actually united* to Christ.

Actual union begins when God the Spirit regenerates and brings a person to trust in Jesus Christ. This is called 'conversion' or "effectually calling," (WSC 30). When this happens, the new Christian is "spiritually and mystically, yet really and inseparably, joined to Christ as their head and husband," (WLC 66). And it is in this united-to-Christ state that Christians "partake of justification, adoption, and sanctification, and the several benefits which in this life do either accompany or flow from them," (WSC 32).

Union with Christ thus gives the Christian a new identity. Instead of being identified with Adam in his rebellion, we are identified with Jesus Christ in his obedience – and in his destiny.

Do you have this new identity? Do you desire it? All you have to do is entrust yourself to Jesus. Are you unsure? There is an easy way to discard your uncertainties: stop wallowing in doubt and surrender to Jesus right now. Simply believe, and he will put his name on you (Acts 15.17, Rev. 14.1). There is no need to be unclear about your identity – or your destiny.

An Identity Defined by a Destiny

"For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his," (Rom. 6.5). For the Christian, resurrection life is not just a future promise. It is also a present reality (cf. Jn. 5.24, Col. 3.1-4).

To say that resurrection life is a present reality is to speak of *sanctification*. The rule here is very simple: as for Christ, so for the Christian, the cross must precede the crown (Mk. 8.34-38). From the moment we believe, the death and resurrection of Jesus becomes the master page in the providential copier machine – and we become sheets of paper sent through the machine over and over again. Through this process of heat and pressure, God applies to us the death and resurrection of Christ. In turn, we come more and more to resemble Jesus: dead to sin, alive to righteousness, (WLC 75, WSC 35). Bearing the excruciating cross becomes the means whereby we are made to reflect Jesus. And in coming to reflect him who is true humanity himself, we ourselves become more truly human. Through suffering we learn to love God not simply for his *gifts*, but for *himself*. This is man's chief end. Its rejection was and is man's great sin. Its accomplishment was Christ's great win. Its application is our sanctification.

The gospel is thus an identity defined by destiny. The cross precedes the crown. Yet so far begetting despair, this reality creates hope – *because the excruciation leads to the consummation*. If the cross must precede the crown, then the crown must follow the cross.

Do you struggle with this? Remember that this life, despite its luster, is a bauble compared to resurrection life (2 Cor. 4.16-18). Every day, a better world draws near (Rom. 13.11; cf. Rev. 21-22).

¹⁴⁷ Letham, *Union with Christ*, 58.

¹⁴⁸ The present author is indebted to Rev. Jody Morris for the terms "decretal" and "existential" union.

An Identity that Overflows into Activity

The active agent of resurrection life is God the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of Christ indwells those united to Christ (Rom. 8.9). Like soup in a bread bowl, the Holy Spirit *saturates* and *permeates* believers¹⁴⁹ – transforming our affections (1Jn. 2.15-17), giving us the mind of Christ (Rom. 12.1-2, 1 Cor. 2.16).

The Christian life consists in *living consistently with our new identity*. Every day we rehearse for the role of our life – life everlasting! Every day we must draw our identity not from the surrounding noise, but from our eternal destiny. When tempted to sin, we tell ourselves, “This isn’t me. Sin is no longer who I am. In Jesus I am a saint, and saints live differently.” This doesn’t mean we’re perfect. “A saint does sin. But a Christian is one who has *saint* as their constant identity and *sinner* as their occasional activity. For the Christian, there is a vital difference between *having* sin and *being* sin.”¹⁵⁰

In Christ, we remember that there is a proper sense in which we are too good for the world. The world is no longer worthy of our affections (Heb. 11.38). We put off sin because grave clothes don’t belong on the living (Jn. 11.44). We seek no place in Atlantis, for we belong to a city with foundations (Heb. 11.10). We have been invited to a great feast (Is. 25.6, Rev. 19.9), and there is no need to go dumpster-diving along the way. In Christ we are accepted: God’s verdict is in, the court is closed, and now we spend our lives doing things not to *look good*, but because they *are good*.¹⁵¹ “The imperatives of the Bible (what you should do) flow out of the indicatives (who you are).”¹⁵²

The essence of all this is simple. Just as we activate faith by *remembering who Christ is* (cf. Mk. 4.40), so we activate resurrection life by *rejoicing in and remembering who we are in Christ*. “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me,” (Gal. 2.20).

Christian, do you believe these things? How much of your life could change today, simply by *crediting the reality* that in Christ you are “dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus,” (Rom. 6.11)? This is the *actual present reality* for every Christian. This is gospel identity. Do you believe?

Important Questions

1. Reformed theology is often perceived as having little use and leaving little space for the work of the Holy Spirit. Is this accurate?
2. To what extent does consciousness of being united to Christ inform your Christian life?

Additional Resources

Letham, Robert. *Union with Christ: in Scripture, History, and Theology*.

For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 50-53, 56-57, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
11-12, 14	70-74, 153	33-34, 85-86

¹⁴⁹ Letham, *Union with Christ*, 50.

¹⁵⁰ Mark Driscoll, *Who Do You Think You Are?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 35.

¹⁵¹ Timothy Keller, *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness* (Chorley, UK: 10Publishing, 2012), 43-44.

¹⁵² Driscoll, *Who Do You Think You Are?*, 39.

Chapter 13: From Courtroom to Living Room

Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 50-53, 56-57

WCF	WLC	WSC
11-12, 14	70-74, 153	33-34, 85-86

Introduction

In the last session, we began to unfold how redemption accomplished (*historia salutis*) is applied to us personally (*ordo salutis*). This application begins with effectual calling – an umbrella term used to describe the various aspects of conversion. In effectual calling God the Holy Spirit regenerates and brings us to faith, “thereby uniting us to Christ,” (WSC 30).

What comes next? In this united-to-Christ state we “partake of justification, adoption, and sanctification, and the several benefits which in this life do either accompany or flow from them,” (WSC 32). In this session, we consider the first two of these – justification, adoption – and faith.

Justification

John Calvin described justification as “the main hinge on which religion turns... For unless you first of all grasp what your relationship to God is, and the nature of his judgment concerning you, you have neither a foundation on which to establish your salvation nor one on which to build piety toward God.”¹⁵³ Moreover, as Packer notes, “The entire New Testament is overshadowed by the certainty of a coming day of universal judgment, and by the problem thence arising: How may we sinners get right with God while there is yet time?”¹⁵⁴ The answer is justification.

To begin, let us consider the definition of ‘justification’ given in WSC 33: “Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.” This concise statement points us toward all the essential tenets of the doctrine. What are these tenets?

First, we should understand the *ground* of justification. On what basis can God declare a sinner to be right? WSC 33 speaks of justification proceeding “only for the righteousness of Christ,” and WLC 70 expands this phrase as “the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ.” The two things in view here are Jesus’ *active* and *passive* obedience.¹⁵⁵ Justification is grounded *not* on our performance, but on the performance of Jesus – his perfect life and propitiatory death.

Second, we must understand the *means* of justification. How does the righteousness of Christ make us right with God? The answer is *double imputation*. The moment we trust Jesus Christ and are thereby united to him, an amazing thing happens: “that righteousness [of Christ] is ours and is made over to us. This is done by imputation, by which God reckons the righteousness of Christ to his people as if it were their own, and accounts to them Christ’s sufferings and satisfaction as if they had suffered and made satisfaction themselves.”¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.1.

¹⁵⁴ Packer, *Knowing God*, 140.

¹⁵⁵ See the previous discussion of these terms under “The Obedience of Christ” in session 11.

¹⁵⁶ Letham, *Union with Christ*, 81.

When we trust Christ, his record of perfect obedience and full payment for sin is legally credited to us. Then, on the basis of this legal record, God declares us right. This declaration is *forensic*: it “has to do with a judgment given, declared pronounced.”¹⁵⁷ It is also *final*: “true Christian identity... takes you *out* of the courtroom. The trial is over. The verdict is in.”¹⁵⁸

To speak of our trusting Christ is to raise the third essential tenet. What is the *instrument* of justification? Our standards tell us, “Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification,” (WCF 11.2).

The word ‘instrument’ is vitally important because it conveys the necessity of faith as the *mechanism* of justification without confusing faith with Christ’s righteousness as the *grounds* of justification. It is this distinction that the confession is keen to preserve when it states that believers are justified “not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ’s sake alone; nor by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness,” (WCF 11.1). As WLC 73 notes, “Faith justifies a sinner in the sight of God... only as it is an instrument by which he receiveth and applieth Christ and his righteousness.”

Adoption

Whereas justification is a *forensic* declaration, adoption is a *fatherly* declaration. In adoption God takes us from the courtroom to the living room.¹⁵⁹ As the catechism describes it, “Adoption is an act of God’s free grace, whereby we are received into the number, and have a right to all the privileges of, the sons of God,” (WSC 34). What are “the privileges of the sons of God”? WCF 12.1 gives us a thorough list:

Privilege	Meaning	Scripture(s)
Identity	“...have his name put upon them...”	Rev. 3.12
Guarantee	“...receive the Spirit of adoption...”	Rom. 8.15, Eph. 1.14
Access	“...to the throne of grace with boldness...”	Rom. 5.2, Eph. 3.12, Heb. 4.16
Confidence	“...are enabled to cry, Abba, Father...”	Rom. 8.15, Gal. 4.6
Pity	“...are pitied...”	Ps. 103.13
Protection	“...protected...”	Prov. 14.26, Ps. 5.11, 1Jn. 5.18
Provision	“...provided for...”	Mt. 6.25-33
Chastening	“...and chastened by him as by a Father...”	Heb. 12.5-11

As we consider the privileges of adoption, J.I. Packer urges us to consider adoption itself as “the highest privilege that the gospel offers”:

Our first point about adoption is that it is the highest privilege that the gospel offers: higher even than justification. This may cause raising of eyebrows, for justification is the gift of God on which since Luther evangelicals have laid the greatest stress, and we are accustomed to say, almost without thinking, that free justification is God’s supreme blessing to us sinners. Nonetheless, careful thought will show the truth of the statement we have just made.

That justification—by which we mean God’s forgiveness of the past together with his acceptance for the future—is the primary and fundamental blessing of the gospel is not in question. Justification is the primary blessing, because it meets our primary spiritual need....

But this is not to say that justification is the highest blessing of the gospel. Adoption is higher, because of the richer relationship with God that it involves....

¹⁵⁷ Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 121.

¹⁵⁸ Timothy Keller, *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness* (Chorley, UK: 10Publishing, 2012), 43.

¹⁵⁹ The present author is indebted for this useful expression to the Rev. Dr. C.N. Willborn.

This free gift of acquittal and peace, won for us at the cost of Calvary, is wonderful enough, in all conscience—but justification does not of itself imply any intimate or deep relationship with God the judge. In idea, at any rate, you could have the reality of justification without any dose fellowship with God resulting.

But contrast this, now, with adoption. Adoption is a family idea, conceived in terms of love, and viewing God as father. In adoption, God takes us into his family and fellowship—he establishes us as his children and heirs. Closeness, affection and generosity are at the heart of the relationship. To be right with God the judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father is a greater.¹⁶⁰

Packer's point in all this is simple: *adoption is the house built on the foundation of justification*. As such, it is a correspondingly greater and richer blessing. "were I asked to focus the New Testament message in three words, my proposal would be adoption through propitiation, and I do not expect ever to meet a richer or more pregnant summary of the gospel than that."¹⁶¹

What effect should his adoptive status have on the life of a believer? From Calvin we may cite at least three. First, it brings *security*: "By the great sweetness of this name he frees us from all distrust, since no greater feeling of love can be found elsewhere than in the Father."¹⁶² Second, it creates in us an affectionate *motive for obedience*: "Because it acknowledges him as Lord and Father, the pious mind also deems it meet and right to observe his authority in all things, reverence his majesty, take care to advance his glory, and obey his commandments."¹⁶³ Third, it stirs in us an appropriate *filial fear* of God: "[the pious] mind restrains itself from sinning, not out of dread of punishment alone; but, because it loves and reveres God as Father, it worships and adores him as Lord. Even if there were no hell, it would still shudder at offending him alone."¹⁶⁴

Faith and the Free Offer of the Gospel – Believing God's Promises

Justification is the foundation of piety and religion. Adoption is the house built upon that foundation. Faith is the key by which we gain access. But what is faith?

In its most general sense, faith is *believing God*. The foundational text is Genesis 15.1-6:

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir." And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

Citing this very passage in Romans 4.1-3, Paul underlines this simple essence of faith:

What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."

¹⁶⁰ Packer, *Knowing God*, 206-207.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹⁶² Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.36.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 1.2.2.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

So faith is believing God. But how do we do that? WCF 14.2 describes faith as that by which “a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God himself speaking therein; and acteth differently upon that which each particular passage thereof containeth; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life, and that which is to come.”

Believing God has three essential components. First, there is *knowledge* of “whatsoever is revealed in the Word.” Second, there is *assent*; we “believeth to be true” what we read in Scripture. Finally, there is *trust*: we “acteth differently upon that which each particular passage thereof containeth; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life and that which is to come.”

Faith requires knowledge, but it is more than bare knowledge. It requires assent to truth, but it is more than mere assent. Faith is never an abstract relationship to certain *information*. It is always a relationship to a *person*. So faith is not faith until it *trusts* Jesus Christ. But how do we do this?

To understand how we trust Jesus, the key word is *promise*. WCF 14.2 says faith is “embracing the promises of God for this life, and that which is to come.” Promises are the way we form a believing connection to another person. A promise is an extension of the one who makes it – a commitment to do what is promised. Therefore, to believe a promise is to take hold of the person who made it. “Abraham believed God.” What did he believe? That God would keep his promise.

Promises are the bridge between heaven and our hearts. Jesus Christ is in heaven, but his promises are here with us. The gospel is his open hand of love to the world and to every person in it. Though we cannot yet take hold of Christ’s physical person, we may now take hold of his literal promise. In receiving his promise, we receive him – for a promise may never be separated from the one who gives it. It is for this reason that WSC 86 teaches us, “Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, *as he is offered to us in the gospel.*” Truly Calvin wrote, “We enjoy Christ only as we embrace Christ clad in his own promises.”¹⁶⁵

How might we summarize the gospel promises of Christ? In *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, the character ‘Evangelista’ states it thus: “‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved’; that is, be verily persuaded in your heart that Jesus Christ is yours, and that you shall have life and salvation by him; that whatsoever Christ did for the redemption of mankind, he did it for you.”¹⁶⁶

How can you “be verily persuaded in your heart that Christ is yours”? How could I ever be sure that he is given to me personally? Commenting on this passage in *The Marrow*, Thomas Boston wrote:

‘That Christ is yours,’ viz. by the deed of gift and grant made to mankind lost... By this offer or deed of gift and grant, Christ is ours before we believe... Even as when one presents a piece of gold to a poor man saying, ‘Take it, it is yours’; the offer makes the piece really his in the sense and to the effect before declared; nevertheless, while the poor man does not accept or receive it; whether apprehending the offer too great to be real, or that he has no liking of the necessary consequents of the accepting; it is not his in possession, nor hath he the benefit of it; but, on the contrary, must starve for it all, and that so much the more miserably, that he hath slighted the offer and refused the gift.

So this act of faith is nothing else but to ‘believe God’ (1Jn. 5.10); ‘to believe the Son’ (Jn. 3.36); ‘to believe the report’ concerning Christ (Is. 53.1); or ‘to believe the gospel’ (Mk. 1.15); not as devils believe the same, knowing Christ to be Jesus, a Saviour, but not their Saviour, but with an appropriating persuasion, or special application believing him to be our Saviour.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 2.9.3.

¹⁶⁶ Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, 132.

Now what this gospel report, record, or testimony of God, to be believed by all, is, the inspired penman expressly declares, "This is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life; and this life is in his Son" (1Jn. 5.11). The giving here mentioned, is not giving in possession in greater or lesser measure, but giving by way of grant, whereupon one may take possession. And the party to whom, is not the election only, but mankind lost. For this record is the gospel, the foundation of faith, and warrant to all, to believe in the Son of God, and lay hold on eternal life in him; but that God hath given eternal life to the elect, can be no such foundation nor warrant: for that a gift is made to certain select men, can never be a foundation or warrant for all men to accept and take it.

... The great sin of unbelief lies, not in not believing that God hath given eternal life to the elect; for the most desperate unbelievers, such as Judas and Spira, believe that, and the belief of it adds to their anguish and torment of spirit; yet they do not set to their seal that God is true; but, on the contrary, they make God a liar, in not believing that to lost mankind, and to themselves in particular, God hath given eternal life in the way of grant, so as they, as well as others, are warranted and welcome to take possession of it, so fleeing in the face of God's record and testimony in the gospel (Is. 9.6, Jn. 3.16, Acts 4.12, Pr 8.4, Rev. 22.17).¹⁶⁷

Though some of the language of this passage is dense, the density contains gold. When we really come to terms with what Fisher and Boston wrote, that gold will seep into our hearts: *God offers Jesus Christ, with all his benefits, freely and sincerely to every soul. Though not all will receive him, he is given as a gift to all. Though many refuse to believe it, the promise is made to all mankind.*

Because this is so, you may "be verily persuaded in your heart that Christ is yours." Calvin wrote, "Here, indeed, is the chief hinge on which faith turns: that we do not regard the promises of mercy that God offers as true only outside ourselves, but not at all in us; rather that we make them ours by inwardly embracing them."¹⁶⁸ Notice particularly the last sentence of *Heidelberg Catechism #60*:

How are you right with God?

Only by true faith in Jesus Christ. Even though my conscience accuses me of having grievously sinned against all God's commandments and of never having kept any of them, and even though I am still inclined toward all evil, nevertheless, without my deserving it at all, out of sheer grace, God grants and credits to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner, as if I had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for me. All I need to do is to accept this gift of God with a believing heart.

The promise is given to all. Therefore it is given to me. Christian faith thus consists in *believing Jesus will keep his gospel promises to me*. "The revelation of God is gospel, promise, the promise of forgiveness and salvation; but on our part nothing can match a promise except believing it: faith. Only by faith does a promise become our possession."¹⁶⁹

Because our faith is based on Christ's promises, it *remains* effective even when it *feels* weak. This is what the confession is getting at in WCF 14.3: "This faith is different in degrees, weak or strong; may be often and many ways assailed and weakened, but gets the victory..." How can this be?

Imagine you are on a high cliff and you lose your footing and begin to fall. Just beside you as you fall is a branch sticking out of the very edge of the cliff. It is your only hope and it is more than strong enough to support your weight. How can it save you? If your mind is filled with intellectual certainty that the branch can support you, but you don't actually reach out and grab it, you are lost. If your mind is instead filled with doubts and uncertainty that the branch can hold you, but you reach out and grab it anyway, you will be saved. Why? It is not the strength of your faith but the object of your faith that actually saves you. Strong faith in a weak branch is fatally inferior to weak faith in a strong branch.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 136-137.

¹⁶⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.16.

¹⁶⁹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 566.

¹⁷⁰ Keller, *The Reason for God*, 232.

To use a more everyday example, resting on Christ is like going to bed. You may not understand much about bed construction, and you may have doubts that the bed can hold your weight. None of that matters. What matters is whether you lie down on the bed. The reality of the gospel is that no matter how little your knowledge or how many your doubts, Christ is strong enough to save you. Ultimately, then, what matters is not *how much* or *how well* you believe, but only *whom* you trust.

The Priority of Faith

Theologians sometimes argue together about which comes first: faith or repentance. The question may seem academic, since the two can never be separated in experience. Yet unless we maintain the priority of faith, we destroy the free offer of the gospel. “Only within the context of faith taking hold of Christ in whom we find the grace of God to us can repentance be evangelical. It cannot, therefore, take precedence over faith either logically or chronologically, since then it would be a work prior to and apart from faith.”¹⁷¹ If we require repentance before faith, rather than as the fruit of faith, we teach men that they must earn the right to trust Christ. This is legalism, and it imperils men’s souls:

In a beautiful New England village a boy lay very sick, drawing near to death, and very sad. His heart longed for the treasure which was worth more to him now than all the gold of the western mines. One day I sat down by him, took his hand, and looking in his troubled face asked him what made him so sad. 'Uncle,' said he, 'I want to love God. Won't you tell me how to love God?' I cannot describe the piteous tones in which he said these words, and the look of anxiety which he gave me. I said to him: 'My boy, you must trust God first, and then you will love him without trying to at all.' With a surprised look he exclaimed, 'What did you say?' I repeated the exact words again, and I shall never forget how his large, hazel eyes opened on me, and his cheek flushed as he slowly said, 'Well, I never knew that before. I always thought that I must love God first before I had any right to trust him.' 'No, my dear boy,' I answered, 'God wants us to trust him; that is what Jesus always asks us to do first of all, and he knows that as soon as we trust him we shall begin to love him. This is the way to love God, put your trust in him first of all.' Then I spoke to him of the Lord Jesus, and how God sent him that we might believe in him, and how, all through his life, he tried to win the trust of men; how grieved he was when men would not believe in him, and everyone who believed came to love without trying at all. He drank in all the truth, and simply saying, 'I will trust Jesus now,' without an effort put his young soul in Christ's hands that very hour; and so he came into the peace of God which passeth understanding, and lived in it calmly and sweetly to the end.¹⁷²

Important Questions

1. Justification is forensic and final. Can this bring assurance to our daily Christian experience?
2. Why is it important that Christians identify themselves not simply as justified, but adopted?
3. How does the concept of promise help us understand both faith and the free offer of the gospel?

Additional Resources

Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*

For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 54-55, 58-62, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
13, 15, 16	75-78	35-36, 87

¹⁷¹ Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*, 100-101.

¹⁷² W.G.T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2003), 789.

Chapter 14: Living in Redemption

Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 54-55, 58-62

WCF	WLC	WSC
13, 15, 16	75-78	35-36, 87

Introduction

We are in the midst of unfolding how redemption accomplished (*historia salutis*) is applied to us personally (*ordo salutis*). Effectual calling unites us to Christ. In union with Christ we “partake of justification, adoption, and sanctification, and the several benefits which in this life do either accompany or flow from them,” (WSC 32). In our last session, we considered justification, adoption, and faith. In this session, we consider sanctification and its two facets: repentance and good works.

Sanctification is Identification¹⁷³

The title of this session comes from OPC minister Steven Miller, who once described sanctification to the present author as, “living in redemption.” Unlike justification and adoption, both of which are defined as “an act” (cf. WSC 33, 34), sanctification is “the *work* of God’s free grace,” (WSC 35).

As the work of God’s free grace, sanctification stands in direct connection to the work of Christ. God the Holy Spirit is “applying death and resurrection of Christ” (WLC 75) to us. It is “through the virtue of Christ’s death and resurrection” (WCF 13.1) that we are “renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness,” (WSC 35).

Sanctification is also directly connected to our union with Christ. The moment we first believe, the moment we are “once effectually called, and regenerated,” we are set apart to God in Christ and have made a principial break with sin. In the eyes of God and the language of Scripture, we are moved from the category of ‘sinner’ to the category of ‘saint’. Theologians refer to this as *definitive sanctification* (1 Cor. 6.11). Conceptually, it is closely connected to adoption (Jn. 1.12).

Definitive sanctification doesn’t mean we never sin. What it means is that sin no longer defines us. “A saint does sin. But a Christian is one who has *saint* as their constant identity and *sinner* as their occasional activity. For the Christian, there is a vital difference between *having* sin and *being* sin.”¹⁷⁴ “It is one thing for sin to live in us: it is another for us to live in sin. It is one thing for the enemy to occupy the capital; it is another for his defeated hosts to harass the garrisons of the kingdom.”¹⁷⁵

First and foremost, then, the Christian life is about *living consistently with our new identity*. Every day we must draw our identity not from the surrounding noise, but from our eternal destiny. When tempted to sin, we tell ourselves, “This isn’t me. Sin is no longer who I am. In Jesus I am a saint, and saints live differently.” Sanctification is thus actively rooted in *remembering who we are in Christ*.

¹⁷³ This section is a refresher on what discussed under “Gospel Identity” in session 12.

¹⁷⁴ Mark Driscoll, *Who Do You Think You Are?*, 35.

¹⁷⁵ Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 145.

Sanctification is Distinct

In speaking of sanctification, we must make several necessary distinctions. The first is between *definitive* and *progressive* sanctification. In the former we are set apart, whereas in the latter we are taken apart – and put back together. In this sense, sanctification is more than an *identity redefinition*. It is a *progressive renovation*. C.S. Lewis makes this point particularly well:

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.¹⁷⁶

Progressive sanctification is all-encompassing in its scope, yet always imperfect in this life. It is all-encompassing because God the Holy Spirit permeates and saturates us, renewing us “in the whole man after the image of God,” (Eph. 4.23-24, Col. 3.9-10). Yet it is always imperfect in this life because there abides “some remnants of corruption in every part,” (WCF 13.2).

Our standards make four important distinctions between justification and sanctification in WLC 77. The following chart breaks these out:

	Justification	Sanctification
What?	Act: God <i>declares</i> us righteous	Work: God <i>makes</i> us righteous
How?	Sin forgiven	Sin uprooted
	Righteousness credited	Righteousness cultivated
When?	As soon as we first believe	Progressively as we live by faith
Where?	Equal in all Christians	Unequal among Christians

Sanctification is *the work of God*. Paul urges the Philippians, “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure,” (2.12-13). We do not sanctify ourselves. “Sanctification is not working out grace, but working out salvation – bringing into expression the salvation that God has worked in us.”¹⁷⁷

Yet sanctification is *the Christian’s responsibility*. “We commune with God to receive that which transforms, then we bring out the fruit. We eat to grow, but cannot make ourselves grow; we grow because we are connected to the root – because we are alive.”¹⁷⁸

Sanctification is Warfare

In Galatians 5.17, Paul writes, “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.” Likewise Peter in his first epistle writes, “Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul,” (1 Pet. 2.11).

¹⁷⁶ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 173.

¹⁷⁷ Steven Miller, personal conversation with the present author.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

Citing these verses, WCF 13.2 asserts that sanctification involves “irreconcilable war.” And WCF 13.3 tells us that like any war, sanctification may involve personal defeats: “the remaining corruption, for a time, may much prevail.” Nevertheless, the overall conflict sweeps – slowly, yet inexorably – toward victory: “yet through the continual supply of strength from the sanctifying Spirit of Christ, the regenerate part doth overcome; and so, the saints grow in grace, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.”

In this conflict, we have two great allies: the gift of a new heart, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Regarding the former, we have already discussed how the regenerate heart has new desires to please God and how we may appeal to the affections.¹⁷⁹ Regarding the latter, we should note two things. Firstly, the Holy Spirit *abides* with us (1Jn. 3.9). We are never alone. Secondly, the Holy Spirit works supernaturally through *ordinary means*.¹⁸⁰

Like all forms of warfare, sanctification involves certain active strategies. Battles are not won by mere identification of the enemy. Battles are won by defensive and offensive combat. The same is true spiritually. Sin must not be merely identified – it must be killed. This requires that Christians actively engage in *mortification* (repentance) and *vivification* (good works). It is to our standards’ discussion of these topics that we now turn.

Repentance

One of the best definitions of repentance is that found in WSC 87: “Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavour after, new obedience.”

Repentance is the fruit of faith. “That repentance not only always follows faith, but is produced by it, ought to be without controversy.”¹⁸¹ “The interdependence of faith and repentance can be readily seen when we remember that faith is faith in Christ for salvation from sin.”¹⁸²

Repentance begins with *perception* (WCF 15.2). On one hand, we must acquire “the sight and sense not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness” of our sins. Sin isn’t bad because it makes us uncomfortable. Too often it does not! Sin is bad because it is “contrary to the holy nature, and righteous law of God.” On the other hand, we must apprehend the better vision of God’s “mercy in Christ to such as are penitent.”

Following perception, repentance must continue with the *affections*. Seeing both his sin and God’s better way, the Christian “grieves for, and hates his sins, as to turn from them all unto God, purposing and endeavoring to walk with him in all the ways of his commandments.”

Repentance must also be *particular* (WCF 15.5). “Men ought not to content themselves with a general repentance, but it is every man’s duty to endeavour to repent of his particular sins particularly.” It is not for no reason that the ancients attributed great power to the knowledge of a thing or person’s name (cf. Mk. 1.24, Mk. 5.9-10). The proof texts cite Zacchaeus and Paul. Both of these men owned their sins before the Lord, and both of them received mercy. There is nothing

¹⁷⁹ See our previous discussion under “Human Freedom and Man’s Fourfold State” in session eight.

¹⁸⁰ See WSC 85 and 88, with their corresponding proof texts. Consider Paul’s list of “the whole armor of God” in Ephesians 6.11-18. Are any of the items listed not accessible by faith through the diligent use of the Word, sacraments, and prayer? How much slowness in our sanctification is due to us grieving the Spirit by neglecting the ordinary means?

¹⁸¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.1.

¹⁸² Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 113.

quite like naming our sins – before God and, when appropriate or necessary, before others (WCF 15.6) – to bring out their odiousness. Sin is like a vampire: it cannot endure the light of full day.

Finally, repentance involves *confidence* (WCF 15.4). “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness,” (1 John 1.9). There is no fine print.

The Practice of Mortification

How do we put all this together, practically? Sinclair Ferguson gives us an outline:¹⁸³

1. *Turn to the Scriptures*. Consult passages such as Romans 8.13, 13.8-14; 2 Corinthians 6.14-7.1; Ephesians 4.17-5.21; Colossians 4.1-17; 1 Peter 4.1-11; 1 John 2.28-3.11. Colossians 3.1-17 is a good place to begin.
2. *Know, rest in, think through, and act upon your new identity – you are in Christ* (Col. 3.1-4). “Failure to deal with the presence of sin can often be traced back to spiritual amnesia, forgetfulness of our new, true, real identity. As a believer I am someone who has been delivered from the dominion of sin and who therefore is free and motivated to fight against the remnants of sin’s army in my heart.”
3. *Expose the working of sin in every area of your life* (Col. 3.5-11). “If we are to deal with sin biblically, we must not make the mistake of thinking that we can limit our attack to only one area of failure in our lives. All sin must be dealt with... The challenge in mortification is akin to the challenge in dieting (itself a form of mortification!): once we begin we discover that there are all kinds of reasons we are overweight. We are really dealing with ourselves, not simply with calorie control. I am the problem, not the potato chips! Mortifying sin is a whole-of-life change.”
4. *Admit sin for what it really is. Call a spade a spade* (Col. 3.5). “Call it ‘sexual immorality,’ not ‘I’m being tempted a little’; call it ‘impurity,’ not ‘I’m struggling with my thought life’; call it ‘evil desire, which is idolatry,’ not ‘I think I need to order my priorities a bit better.’ This pattern runs right through this whole section. How powerfully this unmasks self-deceit — and helps us to unmask sin lurking in the hidden corners of our hearts!”
5. *See sin for what your sin really is in God’s presence* (Col. 3.6). “The masters of the spiritual life spoke of dragging our lusts (kicking and screaming, though they be) to the cross, to a wrath-bearing Christ. My sin leads to — not lasting pleasure — but holy divine displeasure. See the true nature of your sin in the light of its punishment... Take a heaven’s-eye view of sin and feel the shame of that in which you once walked.”
6. *Recognize the inconsistency of your sin* (Col. 3.9-10). “You put off the ‘old man,’ and have put on the ‘new man’... New men live new lives. Anything less than this is a contradiction of who I am ‘in Christ.’”
7. *Put sin to death* (Col. 3.5). “It is as ‘simple’ as that. Refuse it, starve it, and reject it. You cannot “mortify” sin without the pain of the kill. There is no other way!”
8. *Put on the Lord Jesus Christ* (Col. 3.12-17; cf. Rom. 13.14). “Sweeping the house clean simply leaves us open to a further invasion of sin. But when we understand the “glorious exchange” principle of the Gospel of grace, then we will begin to make some real advance in holiness. As sinful desires and habits are not only rejected, but exchanged for Christ-like graces (3:12) and actions (3:13); as we are clothed in Christ’s character and His graces are held together by love (v. 14), not only in our private life but also in the church fellowship (vv. 12–16), Christ’s name and glory are manifested and exalted in and among us (3:17).”¹⁸⁴

Good Works

As vivification is the necessary associate of mortification, so good works are the inseparable corollary of repentance. We are not saved *by* works, but we are saved *for* them (Eph. 2.8-10). Accordingly, the seven paragraphs in WCF 16 outline seven key points on good works:

1. *Good works are defined by God*. Good intentions do not make good works. God alone defines the standard of what is good.

¹⁸³ This section culled from “The Practice of Mortification,” <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/practice-mortification/> (accessed March 26, 2013).

¹⁸⁴ Here Ferguson’s argument echoes Chalmers’s *Expulsive Power of a New Affection*.

2. *Good works are the fruit and evidence of faith.* Good works do not justify us before God (Rom. 4.3), but they are the evidence of living faith (Jas. 2.26).
3. *Good works require an actual influence of the Holy Spirit* (Phil. 2.13, 4.13).
4. *No Christian in this life ever does all, let alone more, than God requires.* The idea that any saint could ever contribute to a “treasury of merit” is nonsense (Lk. 17.10).
5. *Good works never merit forgiveness or eternal life* (Is. 64.6). Our “good works” are never wholly good. When it comes to good works, God gets all glory for the good, and we get all blame for the bad.
6. *A Christian’s good works are graciously accepted and rewarded in Christ.* John Murray wrote:

While it makes void the gospel to introduce works in connection with justification, nevertheless works done in faith, from the motive of love to God, in obedience to the revealed will of God and to the end of his glory are intrinsically good and acceptable to God. As such they will be the criterion of reward in the life to come. This is apparent from such passages as Matthew 10:41; 1 Corinthians 3:8-9, 11-15; 4:5; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 2 Timothy 4:7. We must maintain therefore, justification complete and irrevocable by grace through faith and apart from works, and at the same time, future reward according to works. In reference to these two doctrines it is important to observe the following:

(i) This future reward is not justification and contributes nothing to that which constitutes justification. (ii) This future reward is not salvation. Salvation is by grace and it is not as a reward for works that we are saved. (iii) The reward has reference to the station a person is to occupy in glory and does not have reference to the gift of glory itself. While the reward is of grace yet the standard or criterion of judgment by which the degree of reward is to be determined is good works. (iv) This reward is not administered because good works earn or merit reward, but because God is graciously pleased to reward them. That is to say it is a reward of grace. In the Romish scheme good works have real merit and constitute the ground of the title to everlasting life. The good works are rewarded because they are intrinsically good and well-pleasing to God. They are not rewarded because they earn reward but they are rewarded only as labour, work or service that is the fruit of God’s grace, conformed to his will and therefore intrinsically good and well-pleasing to him. They could not even be rewarded of grace if they were principally and intrinsically evil.¹⁸⁵

7. *The works of unbelievers are always sinful* (Rom. 14.23b, Heb. 11.6).

Idolatry and Gospel Sanctification¹⁸⁶

Good works and repentance are matters of allegiance or non-allegiance to Jesus. We either live for Christ or we live for ourselves (2 Cor 5.15). When we live for ourselves, we are making ourselves the ultimate authority in our lives – serving the creature rather than the Creator (Rom. 1.25). When we serve ourselves, we are try to be our own god (Gen. 3.5). All sin is therefore idolatry.

Idolatry can be very sophisticated. Idols are found not just in foreign temples, but also in the human heart. John Calvin famously wrote, “Man’s nature, so to speak, is a perpetual factory of idols.”¹⁸⁷ Almost anything can be an idol: love, money, success, power, culture, etc. The human heart will tend to turn even *good* things into *gods*.

Idolatry functions at multiple levels. Tim Keller identifies two categories or classes of idols:

	Deep Idols	Surface Idols
Definition	<i>A desire of our heart</i> that has become more important than God.	<i>A person or thing in our life</i> through which our deep idols seek fulfillment.
Examples	<i>Beauty</i> – the love and/or respect of others <i>Comfort</i> – emotional and/or physical <i>Control</i> – power to order things my way	<i>Resources</i> – “I’ll buy what I want!” <i>Relationships</i> – “They’ll give me what I want!” <i>Performance</i> – “I’ll earn what I want.”

¹⁸⁵ John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 2, *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 221-222.

¹⁸⁶ This section adapts insights from Tim Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*.

¹⁸⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.11.8.

Jesus told us that the heart is central (Lk. 6,45). When we sin, therefore, we must look deeper than our behavior. We find and overthrow the idols of our hearts. How do we do this?

Thomas Chalmers wrote, “Love of the world cannot be expunged by a mere demonstration of the world’s worthlessness.... The only way to dispossess [the heart] of an old affection, is by the expulsive power of a new one.”¹⁸⁸ This is a crucial insight. *To overthrow the idols of our hearts, we must not just identify them; we must expel them with something better!*

This process of “gospel sanctification” involves three major steps. They are as follows:

1. *Identify and confess your idols:*
 - a. What do you daydream about? What does your mind effortlessly flow toward in your spare time?
 - b. What is your greatest nightmare? What are the things you could not cope without?
 - c. Where do you spend your resources? Are there things on which you spend too much money?
 - d. What triggers you, emotionally? What evokes your most painful or unreasonable emotions?
2. *Identify the legitimate, deeper desire(s) that the idol has hijacked:*
 - a. Examine your inner spiritual dialogue: what is your heart saying when the idol has control?
 - b. Hint: most idols gain power by hijacking our desire to be valuable and/or safe.
 - c. Example: "It's not good when my spouse lies to me. But it's also not good that I over-react with uncontrolled anger. Why do I do this? Because when my spouse lies to me, my safety feels threatened."
3. *Preach the gospel – “Jesus is better!” – to the deep desire at the point of hijack:*
 - a. The desire for value and safety are already ours in Christ – this is what justification means!
 - b. “I don’t need to fill a bank account to be safe; I’m already safe because he emptied himself at the cross.”
“I want my spouse to be honest and repent of lying... but my safety is found in Jesus.”
 - c. “Jesus must become more beautiful to your imagination, more attractive to your heart, than your idol. That is what will replace your counterfeit gods. If you uproot the idol and fail to ‘plant’ the love of Christ in its place, the idol will grow back.”¹⁸⁹ See also: Gal. 5:16-17!

In sum: To get a dog to drop a stick, show it a frisbee; to get your soul to drop sin, show it heaven!

Important Questions

1. The Roman Catholic Church teaches, “Justification *detaches man from sin* which contradicts the love of God, and purifies his heart of sin.”¹⁹⁰ It further teaches, “Justification establishes *cooperation between God’s grace and man’s freedom*. On man’s part it is expressed by the assent of faith to the Word of God, which invites him to conversion, and in the cooperation of charity with the prompting of the Holy Spirit who precedes and preserves his assent.”¹⁹¹ How do these statements manifest a confusion of justification and sanctification?
2. How do the distinctions surrounding sanctification help us guard against perfectionism (Rom. 7.21-25), pietism (Heb. 5.12-14), and quietism (Heb. 12.14)?
3. How does the statement, “Jesus is better!” encapsulate the process of gospel sanctification?

For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 63-66, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
17-18	79-81	

¹⁸⁸ Chalmers, *Expulsive Power*, 46-49.

¹⁸⁹ Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, 172.

¹⁹⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), #1990.

¹⁹¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1993.

Chapter 15: Our Sure Hope

Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 63-66

WCF	WLC	WSC
17-18	79-81	

Introduction

In our study of how redemption accomplished (*historia salutis*) becomes redemption applied (*ordo salutis*), we have examined how effectual calling unites us to Christ. We have unfolded how, in union with Christ, we partake of justification, adoption, and sanctification. One of the things we discussed in our last session is that sanctification is warfare.

As in any war, so in our sanctification there will be defeats. When we are stung by such defeats, it is easy to fall into defeatist thinking. The Enemy would love to persuade every Christian to despair. In times of struggle, what guarantees do we have that we will actually make it in this Christian life? In days of darkness, what assurance can we have that our faith is sure? These are the sort of questions addressed in this session as we consider perseverance and assurance.

The Sure Guarantee

Our standards define the perseverance of the saints as follows: “They, whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved,” (WCF 17.1). This strong promise echoes Scripture. Our Lord said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand,” (Jn. 10.27-29). Paul affirms, “I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ,” (Phil. 1.6).

How do we understand such a promise? On what basis can we, who know the deceitfulness of our hearts and the tang of our lusts, believe such a guarantee? Our sanctification at (most) times feels like sailing a very small ship through a very great storm. When the deep yawns below us and the waves tower over us, on what can we cast our anchor?

The answer is that perseverance of the saints rests “not upon their own free will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father; upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ, the abiding of the Spirit, and of the seed of God within them, and the nature of the covenant of grace,” (WCF 17.2).

Notice what is said here. Perseverance is founded on *the work of the Godhead*: the Father's love and election, the Son's mediation, and the renewal of the Holy Spirit. Whose work is missing in this list? *Ours*. It is on the basis of *God's sure work, not our response*, that we find “the certainty and infallibility” of perseverance. As WLC 79 notes, we are “kept by the power of God.”

The passage most frequently cited in objection to this doctrine is Hebrews 6.4-6:

For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.

Noting that this difficult passage “cannot be in contradiction to the clear teaching of other passages,” Morton Smith writes:

The above description of the person, does not actually affirm that he is a true believer. All of these things may be true of the person, who coming under the light of the Gospel makes profession of the faith, while he has no real part in it.... Judas Iscariot is, of course, the classic case of one who professed the faith, and appeared to be a part of the body, but who was never converted. He, no doubt, could have been described with these verses in Hebrews.¹⁹²

To this we would add that our standards elsewhere associate this passage from Hebrews with the “rocky ground” hearer of whom our Lord spoke in the parable of the sower.¹⁹³

The Pastoral Focus

Yet the difficulty of the passage from Hebrews raises an important point. Both doctrines under examination in this session – perseverance and assurance – are criticized as encouraging moral laxity. How do we address such concerns?

In response, let us note carefully the subjects of our standards’ discussion: “They whom God hath accepted” (WCF 17.1); “the saints” (WCF 17.2); “true believers” (WLC 79). To whom are given the promises of being kept by God’s power? *Not to all who profess, but to all who truly believe.*

This tells us something very important about both doctrines under consideration in this session. Their focus is *pastoral*. They are meant to encourage struggling yet sincere Christians, not those who blithely profess Christ with their lips but deny him with their lives.

But of course this raises a new – and very pastoral – question. Who counts as a “true believer”? How can one be sure? To answer these questions, we turn now to the doctrine of assurance.

Two Important Distinctions

As we begin our discussion of assurance, we ought to note two distinctions made by our standards. Firstly, *assurance is not of the essence of faith*. It is possible to be a sincere Christian and yet lack assurance (WCF 18.3, WLC 81). Consider the words of the prophet: “Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the voice of his servant? Let him who walks in darkness and has no light trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God,” (Is. 50.10).

Secondly, *assurance is not of the essence of faith*. It is possible for a person to be self-deceived about the state of their souls: “hypocrites and other unregenerate men may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favour of God, and estate of salvation; which hope of theirs shall perish,” (WCF 18.1). Here again, consider the words of another prophet: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer. 17.9).

¹⁹² Smith, *Systematic Theology*, II.505.

¹⁹³ See the proof texts cited by WLC 68 and WCF 10.4.

The Imperative Quest

These qualifications notwithstanding, our standards insist that believers can “be infallibly assured that they are in the estate of grace, and shall persevere therein unto salvation” (WLC 80), and that “this certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion,” (WCF 18.2). As the apostle writes, “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life,” (1Jn. 5.13).

Not only is real assurance really possible; to seek it is a *real duty of every believer*: “it is the duty of everyone to give all diligence to make his calling and election sure; that thereby his heart may be enlarged in peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, in love and thankfulness to God, and in strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience, the proper fruits of this assurance: so far is it from inclining men to looseness,” (WCF 18.3).

Note well the purposes stated in WCF 18.3. Why do we seek assurance of salvation? *Not for license, but for love*. “In the Gospel do we so behold God, as that we may love God. It is there, and there only, where God stands revealed as an object of confidence to sinners and where our desire after Him is not chilled into apathy, by that barrier of human guilt which intercepts every approach that is not made to Him through the appointed Mediator.”¹⁹⁴

A Threefold Diagnostic

So how can a person tell? Our standards give us a threefold diagnostic. This diagnostic has three tests and three tools. The former are listed in WCF 18.1, and the latter in WCF 18.2:

Three Tests

1. Faith: “such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus...”
2. Love: “and love Him in sincerity...”
3. Life: “endeavouring to walk in all good conscience before Him...”

Three Tools

1. Scripture: “the divine truth of the promises of salvation...”
2. Evidence: “the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made...”
3. Testimony: “the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits...”

How do we apply these tests and tools in practice? The most straightforward test is the third. A life devoid of *any* fruit is a life devoid of true faith. But how do those who struggle with the first two pass through the valley of the shadow of our doubts?

Through the Valley of the Shadow of Doubt¹⁹⁵

Many serious Christians struggle with doubts regarding the assurance of their salvation. Such struggles are not always the result of obvious sin or inconsistency in their spiritual lives, and therefore are not simply remedied. In order to resolve their struggle, believers in this condition need two things: sound theological instruction and clear practical guidance. Based on a long personal struggle, the present author believes there are certain theological and practical steps necessary in order to pass out of the perpetual darkness of uncertainty regarding our salvation.

First, we must *understand who God is*. Foundational to solving a struggle with doubts is to begin with the revealed character of God. Remember that the devil’s oldest trick is to make us suspicious

¹⁹⁴ Chalmers, *Expulsive Power*, 50.

¹⁹⁵ This section summarizes J. Montgomery, *Walking Toward the Dawn* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2021).

of God.¹⁹⁶ But God is not a demanding tyrant whom we, or even Christ, must appease *in order for* him to love us. Rather, God is a loving Father who gave Christ *because* he loves us (Jn. 3.16). We don't have to *make* God love us; *God is* love (1Jn. 4.8-11). We must know this, and believe it – not because we always *feel* it, but because Scripture *reveals* it.

This first point has an additional, important implication. If we commit ourselves to God's self-revelation of *himself*, we should also commit ourselves to God's Word as the standard for evaluating *ourselves*. Feelings of doubt may persist for years, and may resist all efforts to pin them down. What can we do? We can commit ourselves to assessing our hearts by, and accepting the conclusion of, Scripture. On this very point, Puritan pastor William Guthrie wrote, "If we prove from Scripture, which is the uncontroverted rule, that you are gracious, and have made a covenant savingly with God, then resolve to grant so much, and to acquiesce in it... Therefore, seek eye-salve from Christ to judge of things according as the word of God shall discover them to be."¹⁹⁷

Having committed ourselves to the verdict of Scripture, the second step in overcoming doubts is to *understand the work of Jesus*. Remember from a previous session that Christ's work was both *active* and *passive*.¹⁹⁸ Jesus has done everything necessary to save us; he obeyed for us and he paid for us. As he hung on the cross, he did not say, "It's in progress..." but rather, "It is finished," (Jn. 19.30).

The third step is to *understand the free offer of the gospel*.¹⁹⁹ Though not all will receive him, Jesus offers himself to all (Jn. 1.11-13). He offers eternal life in himself to whoever desires it (Jn. 7.37-38, Rev. 22.17). Whoever asks receives (Mt. 7.7). "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved," (Romans 10.13). Therefore we should never doubt Christ's goodwill. "And this is the promise that he made to us – eternal life," (1 John 2.25). Is this promise truly given to all people? Note that at Pentecost, the call to repent in faith is called "the promise." "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself," (Acts 2.38-39). The gospel is called "the promise" repeatedly throughout the New Testament.²⁰⁰ Thus *the free offer of the gospel is Christ's promise to me*. When we understand this, the gospel becomes truly wonderful – because now I may see clearly that all the most beautiful promises in the Gospels are no longer just for others, but now also for me! Jesus came to give *me* life abundantly (Jn. 10.10). He laid down his life for *me* (Jn. 10.11). He gives *me* eternal life, and nobody can snatch *me* out of his hand (Jn. 10.28). He will give *me* rest (Mt. 11.28) Everyone who confesses him, believes in him, calls upon him, will be saved (Rom. 10.9-13) – and this includes *me*! Every gospel proposition is as if Christ said to me, "This is what I promise to do for you. Believe me!"

Once we understand the free offer of the gospel as a personal promise from Christ, we are in a position to take the fourth step in overcoming doubts – which is to *understand what faith is*. As we discussed previously,²⁰¹ faith is never an abstract relationship to certain information. It is always a relationship to a *person*. How can we trust a person who is not physically present? The answer is that we grab onto his *promises*. A promise can never be separated from him who makes it, for a promise is an extension of the promiser. Note how John makes this clear by associating the *promise*

¹⁹⁶ See our discussion of "The Devil's Oldest Trick" in session 8.

¹⁹⁷ William Guthrie, *The Christian's Great Interest* (reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2002), 26.

¹⁹⁸ See session 11 under "The Obedience of Christ."

¹⁹⁹ Here we review what we discussed at length in session 13 under "Faith and the Free Offer of the Gospel."

²⁰⁰ See Acts 2.39, 26.6; Rom 4.13, 14, 16, 20; Gal. 3.17, 19, 22; Eph. 3.6; 2 Tim 1.1; Heb. 11.39, 1 Jn 2.25.

²⁰¹ Again, see "Faith and the Free Offer of the Gospel" in session 13.

of the gospel with the *person* of Christ: “And this is the promise that he made to us – eternal life,” (1 John 2.25); “And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son,” (1 John 5.11). By receiving his promise, we receive Christ himself. In believing his promise, we rest on him and trust him. Thus Christian faith is simply *believing Jesus will keep his gospel promises to me*.

The fifth step in overcoming doubts is to *understand how faith saves*. We are saved not by works, but by grace alone through faith alone (Eph. 2.8-9). The trouble is, many Christians treat faith itself, the act of believing, like a work. We fall into believing we must “do it right” in order to be saved. But faith is not a work. Paul sets the two in opposition: “And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness,” (Rom. 4.5). Faith trusts not its *own* ability or activity, but the ability and activity – the promises and power – of *God* (Rom. 4.20-21). I am saved not by *how well* I believe, but only by *whom* I trust. Think of the man born blind. He had limited propositional knowledge. But what did the Lord ask him? “Do you believe *in the Son of Man?*” (Jn. 10.35) The *subjective* operation of faith may vary in strength from day to day, or even moment to moment. Yet the *objective* foundation is Jesus himself, who is “the same yesterday, today, and forever,” (Heb. 13.8). Faith draws all its potency not from its *experience*, but from its *object*. We trust not our performance, but his person.²⁰²

Having walked through these theological steps, we may now take a few practical steps. How do we activate a commitment to Scripture and understanding of faith and the free offer of the gospel?

The first practical step in overcoming doubts is to *prove faith’s existence by its exercise*. Instead of endlessly *examining* your faith, *exercise* it! Don't wallow in doubt. Defy doubt by active faith. Don't try to “do it *right*” – do it *now*! Prove your faith lives. God commands us to believe right now. “And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ...” (1 John 3.23). Reflecting on this, Fisher comments, “Wherefore, you having so good a warrant as God's command, and so great an encouragement as his promise, do your duty; and by the doing thereof you may put it [namely, your believing] out of question, and be sure that you are also one of God's elect.”²⁰³ How do we prove that our faith lives? The best way to prove you are alive is to breathe. In the same way, the best way to prove your faith lives is to make it breathe. How? Faith breathes by prayer. “Just as the first sign of life in an infant when born into the world, is the act of breathing, so the first act of men and women when they are born again, is *praying*,” (J.C. Ryle).²⁰⁴ David writes, “Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us,” (Psalm 62.8). Prayer vocalizes faith (Rom. 10.11, 13). You may use your own words, or the words of Scripture (Ps. 119.94, Mk. 9.24, Jn. 9.38, etc.). Tell Jesus you believe his gospel promises to you. Only pray with sincere desire, and you have proven your faith lives! *The exercise of sincere prayer proves the existence of faith*. “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed?” (Rom. 10.14).

Yet as soon as we mention sincerity, the sensitive heart may tremble. Thus the second practical step is to *prove our sincerity by our desires*. Rightly do we fear self-deception (Jer. 17.9). Yet the sincerity of one's faith can be known. The possibility of self-deception can be disproved. How? *By examining our desires*. Jesus blessed “those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied,” (Mt. 5.6). “Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you,” (Ps. 73.25). Do I hunger and thirst for righteousness? Do I desire Jesus more than

²⁰² Again, see “Faith and the Free Offer of the Gospel” in session 13 – giving special attention to Keller’s example of “weak faith in a strong branch” at the end of the section.

²⁰³ Edward Fisher, *Marrow of Modern Divinity*, 145.

²⁰⁴ J.C Ryle, *Practical Religion* (reprint: Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2013), 61.

anything else? *This is a certain mark of regeneration.* “For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God,” (Rom. 8.7-8). And “the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned,” (1 Cor. 2.14). If I desire God, I am not hostile to him. If I accept the things of God, it must be because I am no longer a “natural” man.

The third practical step is to *prove the reality by the remedy.* When you find yourself wrestling with recurring fear or doubt, don't obsess about it. Rather, *confess* it! Jesus forgives unbelief (Jn. 20.26-29). Remembering that nothing we confess to him can separate us from him (1 Jn. 1.9), ;et every doubt, fear, and question be given to him: “Lord Jesus, save me *even from this.*” In so doing, you are *proving the reality* of your faith *by the remedy* you seek for its deficiency.

The final practical step is to realize that *the work of Jesus covers even our doubts.* Jesus was not just perfect for us in his thoughts, words, and deeds; he was also perfect for us in his *faith* (Heb. 5.7). Even at death, his faith was flawless (Lk. 23.46). Because his obedient life includes a perfect faith, he has made atonement *even for the flaws in our faith.* As Jesus committed his spirit into the hands of his Father, so we can commit our spirits into his hands – and in so doing, we can be sure that nothing – not even our doubts – can separate us from him (Jn. 10.28, Rom. 8.38-39).

The Testimony of the Holy Spirit

Before concluding, we would do well to consider the testimony of the Holy Spirit mentioned in WCF 18.2 and of which Paul writes: “For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God...” (Rom. 8.15-16).

John Murray wrote, “We are not to construe this witness of the Spirit as consisting in a direct propositional revelation to the effect, ‘Thou art a child of God.’”²⁰⁵ But if we are not to expect a voice, for what should we look? What does it mean that the Holy Spirit “bears witness with our spirit”? The present author has never encountered a better explanation than the following:

This operation of the Spirit is best understood, if we produce any syllogism by which our spirit witnesses our sonship: as for example, Whosoever loves the brethren is passed from death to life, and consequently is in Christ: but I love the brethren; therefore, I am passed from death to life. Here there is a threefold operation of the Spirit, or three operations rather. The first is a beam of divine light upon the first proposition, convincing of the divine authority of it, as the word of God. The Spirit of the Lord must witness the divinity of the Scripture, and that it is the infallible word of God, far beyond all other arguments that can be used for it. The second operation is a glorious beam of light from the Spirit, shining upon the second proposition, and so upon His own graces in the soul, discovering them to be true graces, and such as the Scripture calleth so. Thus we are said to ‘know by His Spirit the things that are freely given unto us of God.’ [1 Cor 2:13.] The third operation is connected with the third proposition of the argument, or the conclusion, and this I conceive to be nothing else but an influence upon faith, strengthening it to draw a conclusion of full assurance upon the foresaid premises... I conceive the second operation of the Spirit upon the second proposition, and so upon the graces in the man, is that witness of God's Spirit, that beam of divine light shining upon those graces by which they are made very conspicuous to the understanding... the truth and reality of such and such graces in the man, which our own spirit or conscience depones [testifies] according to its knowledge, and the

²⁰⁵ Murray, *Romans*, 297.

Spirit of the Lord certainly affirms and witnesses to be so; there is a sentence drawn forth, and a conclusion of the man's sonship by the man's faith, breathed upon by the Spirit for that purpose: and this conclusion bears the full assurance of a man's sonship. It may be presumed, that some true saints do not partake of this all their days.²⁰⁶

If Guthrie is right, then the Spirit's testimony is wonderfully simple: *the supernatural conviction that we actually meet the conditions which Scripture declares necessary and sufficient for salvation*. Here's how it works:

1. Take a biblical syllogism: "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life," (John 3.36).
2. As far as I know myself, I believe in the Son. ← Spirit's witness = conviction this is true.
3. Therefore I have eternal life.

Sinclair Ferguson seems to agree:

Paul's statement that it is only through the Spirit that a person can say, "Jesus is Lord," may provide a key. It is the believer who bears witness thus to Christ; but it is only through the ministry of the Spirit in his life that this can take place. In the same way, it is the believer who cries, "Abba! Father!" but we can do this only as the Spirit bears his joint testimony with our spirit. The testimony of the Spirit of sonship is therefore not something existentially distinguishable from this testimony of our own spirits. It is distinct from it, but it cannot be distinguished by an introspective analysis of our consciousness— any more than we can directly detect the work of the Spirit when we say, "Jesus is Lord!" B. B. Warfield finely expresses the balance here when he writes: "Distinct in source, it is yet delivered confluent with the testimony of our own consciousness."

... It should be noted, however, that while the witness of the Spirit is not the same as the fruit of the Spirit, Paul does not present it as a kind of "Route B" to assurance for those whose lives are empty of that fruit. The witness of the Spirit goes hand in glove with the fruit of the Spirit, for Paul has been describing the believer as a person who walks according to the Spirit, not according to the flesh, who lives by putting to death the misdeeds of the body... B. B. Warfield once again well expresses the balance here when he says that the witness of the Spirit is, in a word, not a substitute for the proper evidence of our childship; but a divine enhancement of that evidence.²⁰⁷

When we confess from the heart that "Jesus is Lord," it is both we *and the Holy Spirit* who testify.

Important Questions

1. Suppose you meet a person who professes to be a Christian. They don't attend worship except on holidays, they don't read the Bible, they don't pray unless they're sick... and they don't doubt that they are going to heaven. How do you respond?
2. Critics claim the doctrine of assurance leads to presumption, which leads to spiritual apathy. How would we argue the contrary: that it is lack of assurance that impedes love for God?

Additional Resources

Jeremiah Montgomery, *Walking Toward the Dawn*

For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 67-103, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
19	91-152	39-84

²⁰⁶ William Guthrie, *The Christian's Great Interest*, 106-108 (emphases added).

²⁰⁷ Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*, 208-209, 210-212.

Chapter 16: God's Declared Will

Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 67-103

WCF	WLC	WSC
19	91-152	39-84

Introduction

The third question of the Shorter Catechism asks, "What do the Scriptures principally teach?" The answer gives us the greatest single division in our understanding of the Bible: "The Scriptures principally teach, what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man."

Both Catechisms divide at this point. WSC 4-38 teach us what we are to believe concerning God (cf. WLC 6-90). Having seen this, WSC 39-107 then teach us our duty to God (cf. WLC 91-196).

To this point in our sessions, our study has focused primarily upon the first of these divisions. But in this session, we begin focusing on the second division. Consequently, this portion of our standards deals with the rule of man's obligation: the law of God.

Obligated to Obey

An understanding of our duty to God begins with the nature and character of God. As the Creator of all things – "the alone fountain of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom are all things" – God has absolute rights over all creatures. "To Him is due from angels and men, and every other creature, whatsoever worship, service, or obedience He is pleased to require of them," (WCF 2.2).

In covenant theology, we are used to thinking of our obligations to God in terms of the two great covenants revealed in Scripture: the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. And rightly so. Yet as Paul Helm notes, "the law of nature – the obligation mankind has to worship and serve the Creator – precedes any covenant, both the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. It is only on this basis that the covenant of works can be made intelligible."²⁰⁸

Helm's point is essential. Our obligation to obey God does not originate in *covenant*, but in *creation*. It forms the basis of the covenant of works. Yet because it is not exhausted in the covenant of works, man's obligation to obey God *remains intact within the covenant of grace*. Sinai and Zion are two separate mountains. Yet both rest upon the same earth. Likewise, the covenants of works and grace are distinct covenants in Scripture. Yet both rest upon man's obligation to serve his Creator.

So "what is the duty which God requireth of man?" (WSC 39, WLC 91). "The duty which God requireth of man is obedience to his revealed will." Scripture puts it more poetically: "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Mic. 6.8).

²⁰⁸ Paul Helm, "Introduction" in *Reformed Thought*, 5-6.

The Moral Rule

The first rule of obedience given to mankind was the moral law (WSC 40). WLC 93 gives an excellent definition of this moral law:

The moral law is the declaration of the will of God to mankind, directing and binding every one to personal, perfect, and perpetual conformity and obedience thereunto, in the frame and disposition of the whole man, soul and body, and in performance of all those duties of holiness and righteousness which he oweth to God and man: promising life upon the fulfilling, and threatening death upon the breach of it.

The moral law is revealed to man in two ways. First, it is revealed to man via *conscience*: “For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them...” (Rom. 2.14-15). Thus all human beings are without excuse (Rom. 1.18-20).

The second way God reveals the moral law to us in via the *Ten Commandments*. Speaking of the moral law revealed to Adam, WCF 19.2 notes, “This law, after his fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness; and, as such, was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments, and written in two tables; the first four commandments containing our duty towards God; and the other six, our duty to man.” The Ten Commandments did not begin at Sinai. Rather, they were an *externalization* – a hardcopy – of what was *inscribed* on man’s heart from the start.

WLC 92 makes an interesting distinction. Note its wording: “The rule of obedience revealed to Adam... besides a special command not to eat of the fruit... was the moral law.” The distinction here is between *moral* and *positive* laws. A moral law is a law based on God’s *nature*. Moral laws are permanently binding on all people (cf. WCF 19.5). A positive law, on the other hand, is a declaration of God’s *will in a specific instance*. Positive laws have holy purposes and remain in place for a period of time. Yet because they are not based on God’s nature, they are not permanently binding. The command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was a positive law. Yet it was related to the moral law. Bavinck explains:

Adam knew the moral law by nature. Hence, it did not, like the probationary command, have to be revealed to him in a special way. It is essentially the same as the Ten Commandments but differed in form, for the law given on Sinai presupposes a catalog of sins and therefore almost always speaks in the negative (“Thou shalt not...”), and the moral law before the fall was much more positive. But precisely because in the prefall life of Adam the moral law was in the nature of the case entirely positive, it did not make clear to Adam’s mind the possibility of sin. Hence, in addition to the commandments a positive law. In addition to the commandments, whose naturalness and reasonableness were obvious to Adam, this command was in a sense arbitrary and incidental. In the probationary command the entire moral law came to Adam in a single throw, confronting him with the dilemma: either God or man, God’s authority or one’s own insight, unconditional obedience or independent research, faith or skepticism. It was an appalling test that opened the way either to eternal blessedness or eternal ruin.²⁰⁹

Ceremonial & Judicial Laws

In addition to the moral law, our standards also speak of two other types of law given to the people of God under the Old Testament. These are the *ceremonial* and *judicial* laws.

²⁰⁹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2.574.

Ceremonial laws can be thought of as wedding decorations and preparations. They were elaborate, tangible outworkings of the second and fourth commandments applied to the religious life of Israel, “containing several typical ordinances; partly of worship, prefiguring Christ, His graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits; and partly of divers instructions of moral duties,” (WCF 19.3). But just as the decorations and preparations are finished after a wedding, so after the advent and accomplishments of Christ the ceremonial laws are fulfilled. Thus “all which ceremonial laws are now abrogated, under the new testament.”

The judicial laws of Israel were specific applications of the moral law to the civic circumstances of the Jewish commonwealth. As such, they “expired together with the State of that people” in 587 BC and do not bind “any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require,” (WCF 19.4).

What is “general equity”? The proof texts cited in the standards helpful in getting an idea of what is in view here. For example, the judicial principle of *lex talionis* (law of retaliation) is articulated in the Mosaic law (Ex. 21.24). Likewise, Paul in 1 Corinthians 9.8-14 cites a Mosaic legal provision (Dt. 25.24) in explaining why “those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.”

We must take extreme care when making “general equity” arguments for the application of Mosaic judicial laws to modern society. A comparison of Leviticus 20.10-11 with 1 Corinthians 5.1-5 and 6.9-11 show us that a simplistic “copy and paste” approach is not biblical.

The Usefulness of the Moral Law

Having surveyed the types of law given to the people of God in Scripture, our standards go on to affirm that “the moral law doth forever bind all, as well justified persons as others,” (WCF 19.5). But of what use is the moral law to those outside the church? This question is taken up by our standards in WLC 95-97. We might summarize the answers in the following chart:

To Whom	How Useful
All	Shows us God’s nature Shows us our duty, inability, corruption, and need Shows us Christ’s perfection
Unregenerate	Awakens the conscience and drive them to Christ Leaves them inexcusable if they refuse
Regenerate	Shows us our debt to Christ Provokes us to more thankfulness Provides the rule for obedience

The Extent of the Moral Law

Having shown the usefulness of the moral law, WLC 99 articulates eight principles “to be observed for the right understanding of the ten commandments.” We may summarize these as follows:

1. The law is perfect and thus requires perfection.
2. The law is spiritual and thus all-encompassing.
3. The law is interconnected and unified in its commandments.
4. The law is both explicit and implicatory.
5. The law is absolute without being impractical.
6. The law is categorical and thus bind all specifics of the same kind.
7. Obedience to the law involves federal obligations.
8. Obedience to the law involves social obligations.

In addition to these rules of interpretation, WLC 151 lists for us “those aggravations that make some sins more heinous than others.” We may summarize these as follows:

Sins receive their aggravations...

1. *From the persons offending.* A sin is more heinous if the sinner possesses superior experience, influence, or prominence.
2. *From the parties offended.* A sin is more heinous if committed against God or those to whom we bear a special obligation or relation.
3. *From the nature and quality of the offense.* A sin is more heinous if outward, irreparable, insensible, willful, or continual.
4. *From circumstances of time or place.* A sin is more heinous if it disrupts the Lord's Day, divine worship, public order, or personal company.

The Exposition of the Moral Law

Having laid out the framework for interpretation and application of the moral law, our standards go on to provide a detailed explanation of the Ten Commandments. This exposition is presented in WSC 41-84 and WLC 100-152. Neither space nor time allow us to treat this material exhaustively.

One particular position which pastors, elders, or deacons in the Presbyterian tradition may struggle to affirm is our standards' teaching on observing the Lord's Day as the "Christian Sabbath," (WCF 21.7, WLC 116-121, WSC 58-62). Prospective officers should take a careful look at what our standards say in this matter, comparing it to other voices in the Reformation tradition.²¹⁰

The Heart of the Moral Law: Allegiance to Jesus

In any discussion of the moral law or the Christian's moral obedience, we must always remember that our moral obedience is *not* a way of earning points with God. Jesus already paid everything we owe to God's law. He obeyed the Ten Commandments for us; we obey them now for and in him. It's like debt consolidation: by paying all our debt to God's law, Jesus bought us for himself (Rom. 7.1-6). Therefore we don't follow the moral law to *earn* life in heaven; we follow the moral law to *enjoy* the life of heaven (Rom. 8.1-11). "Allegiance to a person has displaced devotion to a code."²¹¹

Important Questions

1. You have a friend who gets cancer. In facing death they ask you about heaven. "I'm a pretty good person. Do you think God will let me in?" In view of WLC 93, how do you respond?
2. Are civil authorities accountable to God to govern in accordance with the *moral* law? Should they simply copy and paste the Old Testament *judicial* laws?
3. Do you agree with our standards' interpretation of the Lord's Day as the "Christian Sabbath"?

For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 104-118, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
20-21	178-196	98-107

²¹⁰ For example, see the view expressed by John Calvin in *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.8.28-34.

²¹¹ F.F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 189.

Chapter 17: Liberated to Serve

Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 104-118

WCF	WLC	WSC
20-21	178-196	98-107

Introduction

In our last session, we began to consider “what duty God requires of man” (WSC 3). We examined the law of God and our obligation to obey it. But fulfilling our duty to God requires more than just obedience to his law. It also requires us to understand and uphold Christian liberty, both in life and in worship. It is to these considerations that we turn in this session.

A Challenging Question

If we are not careful, “Christian liberty” can become a vacuous concept used to justify all manner of bad behavior. This is a special temptation for Westerners, whose cultural heritage includes explicit affirmations of “rights.” We are tempted to baptize our own definitions of liberty.

Consider two examples. The first was proposed by Thomas Jefferson in the American *Declaration of Independence*: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” The second was offered by 19th century English philosopher John Stuart Mill: “The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it.”²¹²

Both of these definitions have exercised great influence upon our thinking. Consequently, it is easy for us to think of Christian liberty in roughly American or libertarian terms. But this is an error. The question we need to ask is: how does the Bible define the liberty of a Christian?

An Extensive Definition

WCF 20.1 offers an extensive definition of “the liberty which Christ hath purchased for believers under the Gospel.” We can organize this definition in chart form:

	Common in OT & NT	Additionally in NT
<i>Liberty from...</i>	the guilt of sin...	the yoke of the ceremonial law...
	the condemning wrath of God...	
	the curse of the moral law...	
	this present evil world...	
	bondage to Satan...	
	dominion of sin...	
	the evil of afflictions...	
	the sting of death...	
	the victory of the grave...	
	everlasting damnation.	
<i>Liberty To...</i>	free access to God...	fuller communications of the free Spirit of God...
	obedience unto Him...	

²¹² John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (reprint, New York: Bantam, 2008), 17-18.

We may notice two things from this definition. First, Christian liberty is primarily *concerned with our spiritual condition rather than our political situation*. Second, note that Christian liberty *involves obedience to God*. Part of a Christian's liberty is "their yielding obedience unto Him, not out of slavish fear, but a child-like love and willing mind."

As Tim Keller notes, such a concept of freedom is radically different from that of secular culture:

Christianity is supposedly a limit to personal growth and potential because it constrains our freedom to choose our own beliefs and practices. Immanuel Kant defined an enlightened human being as one who trusts in his or her own power of thinking, rather than in authority or tradition. This resistance to authority in moral matters is now a deep current in our culture. Freedom to determine our own moral standards is considered a necessity for being fully human.

This oversimplifies, however. Freedom cannot be defined in strictly negative terms, as the absence of confinement and constraint. In fact, in many cases, confinement and constraint is actually a means to liberation....

A fish, because it absorbs oxygen from water rather than air, is only free if it is restricted and limited to water. If we put it out on the grass, its freedom to move and even live is not enhanced, but destroyed. The fish dies if we do not honor the reality of its nature.

In many areas of life, freedom is not so much the absence of restrictions as finding the right ones, the liberating restrictions. Those that fit with the reality of our nature and the world produce greater power and scope for our abilities and a deeper joy and fulfillment.²¹³

The basic question at stake in this matter is simple: *who defines liberty*? Is liberty something humanity is free to define for itself, or is freedom defined by God? The answer of our culture is the former. The answer of Scripture and our standards is the latter.

Lord of the Conscience

It is because God defines liberty that WCF 20.2 affirms, "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship." To compromise on this is in any way is "to betray true liberty of conscience... to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also."

Twice in Acts 4-5, we see the apostles of Christ brought before the civil magistrates. In both cases, the latter charge the former to stop preaching the gospel and threaten them with punishment. In both cases, the apostles make the same answer: "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge..." (Acts 4.19). When any human authority commands disobedience to God, the Christian's duty is clear: "We must obey God rather than men," (Acts 5.29).

When it comes to "matters of faith or worship," the principle does not change. Not only is the believer free from anything contrary to God's Word, but also from anything added to God's Word. Why do our standards make this expansion? Because in matters of faith and worship, *anything not prescribed in God's Word is contrary to God's Word*. (We will return to this later.) See Mark 7.1-13.

Confessional Disclaimers

Because Christian liberty is so often abused, our standards include two explicit disclaimers. First, *Christian liberty is never a license to sin*. Those who pretend otherwise "do thereby destroy the end of Christian liberty; which is, that, being delivered out of the hands of our enemies, we might serve the Lord without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him, all the days of our life," (WCF 21.3)

²¹³ Keller, *The Reason for God*, 45-46.

Second, *Christian liberty is never an excuse for civil or ecclesiastical sedition or rebellion.* Those who pretend otherwise by “oppos[ing] any lawful power, or the lawful exercise of it, whether it be civil or ecclesiastical, resist the ordinance of God.” Such resistance includes the “publishing of such opinions, or maintaining of such practices, as are contrary to the light of nature, or to the known principles of Christianity (whether concerning faith, worship, or conversation), or to the power of godliness; or, such erroneous opinions or practices, as either in their own nature, or in the manner of publishing or maintaining them, are destructive to the external peace and order which Christ hath established in the Church,” (WCF 21.4).

The application of this latter disclaimer may be tricky, for we must notice that our standards speak of “*lawful power*,” and Paul writes that the civil magistrate is “*God’s servant for your good*,” (Rom. 13.4). There may be times when Christians legitimately disagree as to what is lawful or good. But especially in such times, we must remember three things. First, we must remember that *good* is defined not by men, but by God. Second we must remember that *liberty* is not defined by human constitutions, but by God’s Word. And third, we must remember that God does not approve of rebellion or sedition on our part except when his standards or Word are at stake.

Liberty in Worship

The way we worship God follows directly from our understanding of Christian liberty. If God alone is Lord of the conscience, then public worship is free only insofar as it follows a God-defined pattern. WCF 21.1 articulates this understanding: “The acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.” This understanding is referred to as the *regulative principle of worship*.²¹⁴

Following this regulative principle, the free worship of God must be *exclusive in its object* (WCF 21.2) and *restrictive in its content*. God’s free worship should include only those elements which God prescribes in his Word. If we think about it, this only makes sense. If God is the infinite, transcendent Creator, and we are finite, immanent creatures, how else could we ever know the appropriate way to worship him, unless he reveals it to us?

So what elements of worship does Scripture prescribe? WCF 21.3-5 articulates four ordinary elements: corporate prayer, the reading of Scripture, the preaching and “conscionable hearing” of Scripture, the singing of ‘psalms,’²¹⁵ and the administration of the sacraments. In addition to these required elements, the OPC *Directory for Public Worship* also permits the inclusion of several others, based on biblical example or principle.²¹⁶ These include: a call to worship (Ps. 100.1), a salutation (Rom. 1.7), a benediction (Num. 6.24-26, 2Co 13.14), public confessions of faith (Dt. 26.5, Ps. 136), and the bringing of offerings (1 Cor. 16.1-3).

²¹⁴ Given the connection to Christian liberty and the popular connotation of ‘regulative,’ we might well question whether ‘regulative’ is the best term to use in explaining this principle. Perhaps ‘revelational’ might be more appropriate, since the point is that we worship God only in the way he reveals.

²¹⁵ It is sometimes suggested that the use of the word ‘psalms’ here implies a confessional teaching of exclusive psalmody. This suggestion is historically inaccurate. The definition of the ‘psalm’ current at the time of the Westminster Assembly was “inspired praise only,” not exclusive psalmody (though that was the practice of the majority of the Assembly). This is evidenced by the fact that in 1647, the same General Assembly of the Church of Scotland that adopted the WCF also commissioned men to prepare “scripture songs” to be used alongside the metrical psalms. The OPC understands the language of WCF 21.5 to permit the use of hymns (cf. *The Directory for Public Worship*, II.B.2.c). Even after the “Reports of the Committee on Song in Worship” (delivered to the 13th and 14th Gas in 1946-1947), the OPC has never amended its confessional standards.

²¹⁶ See the second chapter of *The Directory for the Public Worship of God* (Willow Grove: OPC, 2011).

Besides these ordinary elements, our standards also recognize several extraordinary parts of worship: “religious oaths, vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings upon special occasions, which are, in their several times and seasons, to be used in an holy and religious manner,” (WCF 21.5).

Worship in Context

The remainder of WCF 21 sets forth the context and setting of the free religious worship of God. It does this both negatively and positively. We can examine these sections using the journalists’ questions: where, when, and how.

Where is God to be worshipped? Negatively, WCF 21.6 tells us that “neither prayer, nor any other part of religious worship, is now, under the Gospel, either tied unto, or made more acceptable by, any place in which it is performed, or towards which it is directed; but God is to be worshipped everywhere in spirit and truth.” In other words, New Testament worship requires no *sacred space*. Yet New Testament worship does require *sacred priority*, for God is to be worshiped “in private families daily, and in secret, each one by himself; so more solemnly in the public assemblies,” (21.6).

When is God to be worshipped in the public assemblies? WCF 21.7 explains that God “hath particularly appointed one day in seven, for a Sabbath, to be kept holy unto him: which, from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, was the last day of the week; and, from the resurrection of Christ, was changed into the first day of the week, which, in Scripture, is called the Lord’s Day, and is to be continued to the end of the world, as the Christian Sabbath.”²¹⁷

Finally, *how* is God to be worshipped on the Lord’s Day? Following its strict understanding of the Lord’s Day as the “Christian Sabbath,” WCF 21.8 states that the “Sabbath is then kept holy unto the Lord” when believers “not only observe an holy rest, all the day, from their own works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments and recreations; but also are taken up, the whole time, in the public and private exercises of his worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy.” Others in the Reformation tradition prefer to emphasize not a strict list of required and prohibited activities, but rather a principle of *God-centeredness*: the Lord’s Day should be filled with activities that facilitate, celebrate, and propagate Christ-centered rest. These activities include physical rest, private meditation, and public worship, but are not necessarily limited to only these things.

Important Questions

1. Suppose the US Federal Government enacts a law that bans the possession of all firearms and requires citizens to surrender their guns. Upon challenge, the US Supreme Court upholds this law. The state in which you reside agrees to enforce it. What is the duty of the Christian citizen?
2. Is Presbyterian worship “too strict”? What assumptions lie behind this criticism?

Additional Resources

OPC, *The Directory for Public Worship*

For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony*, 119-120, 124-125, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
22, 24		

²¹⁷ Again, it should be noted that within the Reformation tradition there are different interpretations of the 4th Commandment regarding the identification and observance of the Lord’s Day as the “Christian Sabbath.” For an alternative perspective to that of our standards, see John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.8.28-34.

Chapter 18: Ties That Bind

Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 119-120, 124-125

WCF	WLC	WSC
22, 24		

Introduction

In the last session, we considered the issues of Christian liberty in life and in worship. In so doing, we saw that our confession distinguishes between ordinary and extraordinary parts of worship. Among the former are praise, prayer, reading, and preaching. Among the latter are “religious oaths, vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings upon special occasions,” (WCF 21.5). It is the matter of oaths and vows – and marriage as a particular instance – to which we turn in this session.

Definitions & Distinctions

Our confession defines a “lawful oath” as “a part of religious worship, wherein, upon just occasion, the person swearing solemnly calleth God to witness what he asserteth or promiseth; and to judge him according to the truth or falsehood of what he sweareth,” (22.1). In this definition we see several components: an *obligator* (the person swearing), an *obligation* (the thing asserted or promised), a *witness* to the obligation, and an *enforcer* of the same. In these general features, “a vow is of the like nature with a promissory oath,” (22.5).

Why are oaths and vows considered acts of worship? A.A. Hodge’s explanation is helpful: “An oath is an act of supreme religious worship, since it recognizes the omnipresence, omniscience, absolute justice and sovereignty of the Person whose august witness is invoked, and whose judgment is appealed to as final.” For this same reason, “it is a sin equivalent to that of worshipping a false god if we swear by any other than the only true and living God; and a sin of idolatry if we swear by any thing or place, although it be associated with the true God.”²¹⁸

How do oaths and vows differ? Our confession makes several distinctions. An oath may be “imposed by lawful authority” (22.2), whereas a vow is “to be made voluntarily” (22.6). And whereas an oath is made to men – even “heretics, or infidels” (22.4) – a vow is “not to be made to any creature, but to God alone (22.6). In an oath, we swear by God to a man. But with a vow, we swear by faith to God.

Sobering Obligations

Oaths and vows are to be taken quite seriously. Since God himself is invoked, it is foolish and sinful to swear “vainly, or rashly, by that glorious and dreadful Name,” (22.2). Notice a few of the proof texts cited here. One is a direct statement of our Lord: “But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil,” (Mt. 5.34-37). Another is a strong statement of our Lord’s brother: “But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your ‘yes’ be yes and your ‘no’ be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation, (Jas. 5.12).

²¹⁸ Hodge, *Confession of Faith*, 287.

What are we to make of these statements? On the surface, they seem like blanket prohibition against oaths and vows. But are they? Compare them with four other passages from Scripture:

So that he who blesses himself in the land shall bless himself by the God of truth, and he who takes an oath in the land shall swear by the God of truth; because the former troubles are forgotten and are hidden from my eyes. (Is. 65.16)

But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to him, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven." (Mt. 26.63-64)

After this, Paul stayed many days longer and then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila. At Cenchreae he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow. (Acts 18.8)

For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. (Rom. 1.9-10)

But I call God to witness against me – it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth. (2 Cor. 1.23)

If our Lord intended a blanket prohibition against all oaths and vows, how could he prophesy of oaths in the Messianic age? How could he himself submit to adjuration (Gk. *exorkrizō* – to put under oath)? How could Paul call God to witness against him or place himself under a vow?

It appears, then, that what both our Lord and his brother intended to prohibit were not *lawful* oaths and vows invoking God "in matters of weight and moment" (22.2), but rather *frivolous* or *false* oaths or vows (22.3-4). Reflecting these passages, Hodge concludes: "It is evident, therefore, that the words of our Saviour... cannot be intended to forbid swearing upon proper occasions in the name of the true God, but must be designed to forbid the calling upon his name in ordinary conversation and on trifling occasions."²¹⁹

Restrictions

Both oaths and vows must be used lawfully. On this point, our confession is clear. An oath "cannot oblige to sin; but in anything not sinful being taken, it binds to performance, although to a man's own hurt; nor is it to be violated, although made to heretics or infidels," (22.4). Likewise "no man may vow to do anything forbidden in the Word of God, or what would hinder any duty therein commanded, or which is not in his own power, and for the performance whereof he hath no promise of ability from God," (22.6).

In its historical context, our confession was taking aim at two specific errors of the Roman Catholic Church. Regarding the first, Hodge explains:

The Romanists excuse the practice of their Church of releasing persons from the obligation of oaths to infidels or heretics, and of breaking faith generally with all with whom she has controversy, on the plea that an oath cannot bind to that which is unlawful or release from a prior obligation, and that the highest of all obligations is to subserve at all cost the interest of the Church. But they deliberately make the oath in order to break it, and therefore both lie and profane God's holy name in the making and the breaking.²²⁰

²¹⁹ Ibid., 288. Hodge also considers lawful oaths and vows an implication of the third commandment.

²²⁰ Ibid., 290.

As an historical example of such treachery, one need think no further than the case of Jan Hus – the Czech proto-reformer whose safe passage to the Council of Constance was cancelled on the ground that he was a heretic. As for biblical counterexamples, see Joshua 9.18-19 and Ezekiel 17.11-21.

Regarding the second error of the Reformation era, our confession itself describes “Popish monastical vows of perpetual single life, professed poverty, and regular obedience” as “superstitious and sinful snares, in which no Christian may entangle himself,” (22.7). In such cases, “the sin is in taking the oath to do the unlawful thing, not in breaking it. Therefore Luther was right in breaking his monastic vows.”²²¹

Finally, citing Numbers 30.1-8, Hodge notes that neither oath nor vow can be taken lawfully “by a child or other person under authority and destitute of the right to bind themselves of their own will.” He then offers the following sound conclusion: “The multiplication of self-imposed duties dishonours [God], and greatly harasses us and endangers our safety. Vows had better be restricted to the voluntary assumption and promise to observe, with the help of divine grace, duties imposed by God and plainly revealed in the Scriptures.”²²²

The Definition & Purpose of Marriage

One of the most common and familiar instances in which people engage in public adjuration is marriage. Our confession defines marriage in clear terms as a relationship “between one man and one woman: neither is it lawful for any man to have more than one wife, nor for any woman to have more than one husband at the same time,” (24.1). According to Scripture, marriage is *exclusive*, *heterosexual*, and *monogamous*.

Our confession goes on to describe the threefold *purpose* of marriage: “the mutual help of husband and wife, for the increase of mankind with legitimate issue, and of the Church with an holy seed; and for preventing of uncleanness,” (24.2). According to Scripture, marriage is *helpful*, *fruitful*, and *protective*. “He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the LORD,” (Prov. 18.22). And so far from being prudish, Scripture often extols the act of marriage in very explicit terms.²²³

In understanding this threefold purpose for marriage, the present author believes there is a sound answer to a commonly raised question: if marriage existed before the Fall, and if it is good, then why does Jesus say that there is no marriage in the resurrection (Mt. 22.30, Mk. 12.25, Lk. 20.35)? In the new creation, nobody will be alone or lacking for help. Nor will there be any more uncleanness (Rev. 21.4, 27). Finally, in the resurrection humanity will be a complete host. As Bavinck so beautifully describes: “Not the man alone, nor the man and woman together, but only the whole of humanity is the fully developed image of God, his children, his offspring. The image of God is much too rich for it to be fully realized in a single human being... it can only be somewhat unfolded in its depth and riches in a humanity counting billions of members.”²²⁴

So marriage is good, but it is not humanity’s chief good. Our chief good is God, and in the resurrection we will glorify and enjoy him together. Marriage will disappear – not because it is bad, but because it is finished:

²²¹ Ibid., 289.

²²² Ibid., 291.

²²³ See Prov 5.19. See also the entire Song of Solomon.

²²⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2.577.

Hunger and thirst being no more – there shall be no need of food. Weariness and fatigue being no more – there shall be no need of sleep. Death being no more – there shall be no need of births to supply the place of those who are removed. Enjoying the full presence of God and his Christ – men and women shall no more need the marriage union, in order to help one another. Able to serve God without weariness, and attend on him without distraction, doing his will perfectly, and seeing his face continually, clothed in a glorious body, they shall be ‘as the angels which are in heaven.’In the world to come, all shall be changed. Nothing shall be lacking to make his happiness complete.”²²⁵

Restrictions on Marriage

Marriage is not only for believers: “It is lawful for all sorts of people to marry, who are able with judgment to give their consent.” However, as an institution established by God, marriage is bound by God’s parameters. Consequently, “it is the duty of Christians to marry only in the Lord.” A believer “should not marry with infidels, papists, or other idolaters: neither should such as are godly be unequally yoked, by marrying with such as are notoriously wicked in their life, or maintain damnable heresies,” (24.3). Marriage should foster *spiritual unity* – not undermine it.

In addition to spiritual restrictions, the Scriptures also outline *physiological* restrictions on marriage. There is such a sin as *incest* – engaging in a sexual relationship “within the degrees of consanguinity or affinity forbidden by the Word,” (24.4). The Levitical code contains strict prohibitions on incest (Lev. 18.6-18, 20.19-21). The extent to which these carry over into the ethics of the new covenant is debatable.²²⁶ However, the New Testament makes clear that certain relationships are still *a priori* forbidden (Mk. 6.18, 1 Cor. 5.1).

So marriage is for all, but so are God’s rules. Hodge’s words sound prophetic:

Hence it follows that marriage is a religious as well as a civil contract. No State has any right to change the law of marriage, or the conditions upon which it may be lawfully constituted or dissolved, as these have been ordained by God. Neither has any man or woman a right to contract any relation different in any respect, as to its character or duration, from that which God has ordained as marriage.... The law of the land is to be obeyed for conscience’ sake whenever it does not contravene *the higher law of God*. When it plainly does so, then Christian men and church sessions are to act themselves and treat others just as if the ungodly human enactment had no existence, and then take the consequences.²²⁷

That marriage is for all does *not* mean that all are required to marry. Both our Lord and the apostle Paul indicate that there are some circumstances in which and certain individuals for whom singleness is preferable (Mt. 19.10-12, 1 Cor. 7). “In times of persecution and public danger, and with reference to some special kind of service to which God providentially calls a man, it may be both his interest and his duty not to marry.”²²⁸

²²⁵ J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*, vol. 2, *Expository Thoughts on Mark* (reprint, Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2012), 204.

²²⁶ As the footnote in Smith’s *Harmony* indicates, a portion of the original text of WCF 24.4 was deleted by the PCUS in 1886. It was also deleted by the PCUSA in 1887. Consequently, it appears in neither the OPC nor PCA versions of the standards.

²²⁷ Hodge, *Confession of Faith*, 302-303.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 304.

Dissolution of Marriage

The last two paragraphs of WCF 24 deal with the undesirable circumstances in which an engagement (a 'contract' was a public announcement of an engagement) or a marriage may be dissolved. Following the teachings Scripture, our confession recognizes two such situations – and only two: “nothing but adultery, or such wilful desertion as can no way be remedied by the Church, or civil magistrate, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage.” Yet in both cases, it adds that “a public and orderly course of proceeding is to be observed; and the persons concerned in it not left to their own wills, and discretion, in their own case,” (24.6).

Regarding “wilful desertion,” Tim Keller raises an important question:

A fair question is, What is meant by “desertion”? The Biblical text says the spouse must be “willing to live with her” (1 Corinthians 7:13). What about physical abuse? Could it not be argued that a man who is beating a woman has essentially deserted her, has given up his willingness to be with his wife? Yes, I personally think so. But this very question leads to an important conclusion. Christians who are weighing divorce, if they want to live with their consciences and their God for the rest of their lives, should not make these decisions all by themselves. Matthew 18:15ff says that when someone sins against you—and adultery, desertion, and abuse are grievous sins—you should “tell it to the church.”²²⁹

Remarriage after Divorce

What happens after divorce? Can those involved ever remarry? “In the case of adultery after marriage, it is lawful for the innocent party to sue out a divorce: and after the divorce, to marry another, as if the offending party were dead,” (WCF 24.5). What about in cases of desertion, or for those who divorced on unbiblical grounds? Opinions differ here, yet a few things seem clear.

First, 1 Corinthians 6.9-11 teaches that unbelievers with sexual sin in their past are washed when they come to faith in Jesus Christ. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5.17, “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” Their history is forgiven.

Second, mere words cannot break the marriage bond; husband and wife are “one flesh,” (Mt. 19.6). Therefore two Christians who divorced wrongly and have remained unmarried should seek to reconcile. If one of them instead gets married to a third party, the consummation of that new marriage will involve a one-time act of adultery against the first marriage.

Third, after consummation such a remarriage is henceforth to be honored and protected; it is a real marriage. If this were not so, how could our Lord warn against “marrying another” (Mt. 19.9)? It therefore not only binds the remarried spouse, it also frees the unmarried original spouse from any further obligation to *restore* the first marriage: the one-time act of adultery sealing the remarriage frees them to marry another (WCF 24.5). Nevertheless, even in such cases, one or both of the original spouses remain under obligation to seek *forgiveness* for the dissolution of the first marriage.

Finally, what of those who have been willfully deserted? Although our standards do not explicitly address this point, Paul says a deserted spouse “is not enslaved,” (1 Cor. 7.15). In the judgment of the present author, Keller’s observation seems accurate: “This would be a pointless tautology unless he were saying the divorced person is free to remarry.”²³⁰

²²⁹ Timothy Keller with Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage* (New York: Dutton, 2011), 258.

²³⁰ Ibid.

Important Questions:

1. What examples of lawful oaths/vows exist in our society today? Unlawful oaths/vows?
2. What restrictions apply to all marriages? What additional restrictions apply to Christians?
3. Should a church member ever seek divorce without consent of their session?
4. Is marriage a religious institution, a civil institution, or both? Why does the question matter?
5. Keller discusses how the Enlightenment affected the way people think about marriage:

Older cultures taught their members to find meaning in duty, by embracing their assigned social roles and carrying them out faithfully. During the Enlightenment, things began to shift. The meaning of life came to be seen as the fruit of the individual to choose the life that most fulfills him or her personally. Instead of finding meaning through self-denial... marriage was redefined as finding emotional and sexual fulfillment and self-actualization.... In short, the Enlightenment privatized marriage, taking it out of the public sphere, and redefined its purpose as individual gratification, not any "broader good" such as reflecting God's nature, producing character, or raising children.²³¹

- a. In what ways has this shift led to the cultural denigration of heterosexual marriage?
- b. In what ways has it led to the cultural legitimization of homosexual 'marriage'?

Additional Resources:

Tim and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*

For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony*, 121-123, 126-131, 148-150, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
23, 25-26, 30-31	61-66, 82-83, 86, 90	36-38

²³¹ Ibid., 28.

Chapter 19: Church and Commonwealth

Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 121-123, 126-131, 148-150

WCF	WLC	WSC
23, 25-26, 30-31	61-66, 82-83, 86, 90	36-38

Introduction

In the last session, we considered the subject of oaths, vows, and the institution of marriage. In this session, we turn to consider the other two great institutions God has given to mankind: the church and civil society. The discussion of the former spans several chapters in our confession (WCF 25, 26, 30-31). The discussion of the latter, to which we turn first, comprises but one chapter (WCF 23).

The Civil Magistrate

According to the dictionary, a magistrate is “a civil officer with power to administer and enforce law” or “a person clothed with power as a public civil officer.”²³² Accordingly, when our confession speaks of the “civil magistrate,” it is speaking of civic government and civil society.

Our confession articulates several important truths regarding the civil magistrate. First, according to WCF 23.1, the *purpose* of civil governments is “His own glory, and the public good.” To this end, God has appointed civil magistrates and “hath armed them with the power of the sword, for the defence and encouragement of them that are good, and for the punishment of evil doers.” Second, the *legitimacy* of civil government derives from fact that “God the supreme Lord and King of all the world, hath ordained civil magistrates to be under Him, over the people.”

Following these basic points, our confession affirms that “It is lawful for Christians to accept and execute the office of a magistrate, when called thereunto,” (WCF 23.2). Yet when Christians are so called, they “ought especially to maintain piety, justice, and peace, according to the wholesome laws of each commonwealth.” When the maintenance of such requires it, “they may lawfully, now under the New Testament, wage war upon just and necessary occasions.” This idea of *just war* was first articulated by Augustine: “War should have as its goal the establishment of justice and the restoration of peace. It must be fought under the authority of the legitimate ruler and be conducted in a just manner, which included keeping one’s promise to the enemy and refraining from looting, massacre and burning, so that noncombatants would not be injured.”²³³

What *limits* does our confession place upon the civil magistrates, particularly in regard to the church?²³⁴ “Civil magistrates may not assume to themselves the administration of the Word and Sacraments; or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven; or, in the least, interfere in matters of faith.” Moreover, “no law of any commonwealth should interfere with, let, or hinder, the due exercise thereof, among the voluntary members of any denomination of Christians, according to their own profession and belief,” (23.3).

²³² “Magistrate” from *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. and the *Collaborate International Dictionary of English*, <http://www.wordnik.com/words/magistrate> (accessed August 14, 2013).

²³³ R.G. Clouse, “War and Peace” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J.I. Packer (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1988), 715.

²³⁴ As evident from the differing texts of 23.3 printed in Smith’s *Harmony*, there is some disagreement on the questions of limits and duties between the *Confession of Faith* as written in 1646 and the American form of the same adopted in 1789. The Orthodox Presbyterian Church subscribes to the latter.

Likewise in regard to the church, what *duties* does our confession place upon the civil magistrate? First, they are to act “as nursing fathers” and “protect the Church of our common Lord, without giving the preference to any denomination of Christians above the rest, in such a manner that all ecclesiastical persons whatever shall enjoy the full, free, and unquestioned liberty of discharging every part of their sacred functions, without violence or danger.” Second, “it is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the person and good name of all their people, in such an effectual manner as that no person be suffered, either upon pretense of religion or infidelity, to offer any indignity, violence, abuse, or injury to any other person whatsoever.” Third, they are “to take order, that all religious and ecclesiastical assemblies be held without molestation or disturbance.”

Finally, our confession speaks of the duties of the people toward the civil magistrates: “It is the duty of people to pray for magistrates, to honour their persons, to pay them tribute or other dues, to obey their lawful commands, and to be subject to their authority, for conscience sake,” (23.4) These duties do not change, *even when the ruler is an unbeliever*: “Infidelity, or difference in religion, doth not make void the magistrates’ just and legal authority, nor free the people from their due obedience to them.”

The Church

The first distinction made by our standards with respect to the church is the distinction between the *invisible* and *visible* church. The former consists of *all the elect in all of history*: “the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof,” (25.1). The latter consists of *all professing Christians, with their children, alive in the world today*: “all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children,” (25.2).

Our confession makes a strong claim regarding the visible church – namely, that “outside of [it] there is no ordinary possibility of salvation,” (25.2). On what grounds can such a strong claim be substantiated? The answer is simple: union with Christ.²³⁵ When we are effectually called, every believer is “spiritually and mystically, yet really and inseparably, joined to Christ as their head and husband,” (WLC 66). First, note how this latter phrase, “head and husband,” is echoed in the description of the invisible church as “under Christ *the Head thereof*; and is *the spouse, the body...*” (25.1). This teaches us that *union with Christ unites the believer to the invisible church*.

Second, note that, under normal circumstances at any given time in history, the visible church *is the current manifestation of the invisible church*.²³⁶ Thus, while never taking a *magical* or *mechanistic* view of the visible church (WLC 61), our confession suggests a much higher view than that to which many evangelical Protestants are inclined. Let us ever beware of falling into the folly Screwtape describes:

One of our great allies at present is the Church itself. Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean the Church as we see her spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners. That, I confess, is a spectacle which makes our boldest tempters uneasy. But fortunately it is quite invisible to these humans. All your patient sees is

²³⁵ See the previous discussion of union with Christ under “Gospel Identity” in session 13.

²³⁶ Perhaps an analogy will help. First, let us imagine the invisible church as a great railroad track – stretching down through history from the gates of Garden of Eden to the gates of the New Jerusalem. Second, let us imagine a single train traveling this track. The engine is Christ, the passenger cars are the visible church, and the position of the train corresponds to the present calendar date in the world’s history. Now, given this situation, is it possible that legitimate passenger may for a season fail to catch, or fall off, the train? Sure. Is it possible that a person may for a season board the train without possessing a ticket? Sure (cf. WLC 61). But can a person credibly claim to be a passenger if they refuse to board the train? No.

the half-finished, sham Gothic erection on the new building estate. When he goes inside, he sees the local grocer with rather an oily expression on his face bustling up to offer him one shiny little book containing a liturgy which neither of them understands, and one shabby little book containing corrupt texts of a number of religious lyrics, mostly bad, and in very small print. When he gets to his pew and looks round him he sees just that selection of his neighbours whom he has hitherto avoided. You want to lean pretty heavily on those neighbours. Make his mind flit to and fro between an expression like 'the body of Christ' and the actual faces in the next pew. It matters very little, of course, what kind of people that next pew really contains. You may know one of them to be a great warrior on the Enemy's side. No matter. Your patient, thanks to Our Father Below, is a fool. Provided that any of those neighbours sing out of tune, or have boots that squeak, or double chins, or odd clothes, the patient will quite easily believe that their religion must therefore be somehow ridiculous.²³⁷

Having made these distinctions and qualification, our confession goes on to describe the *means* and *mission* of the church. The *means* of the church – the weapons of our warfare – are “the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God” made effectual “by His own presence and Spirit.” This description is fleshed out further by WSC 88: “The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption, are his ordinances, especially the word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.” The *mission* of the church is “the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life to the end of the world,” (25.3). This idea of “gathering and perfecting” is the basis from which we derive the church’s threefold task of *worship, walk, and witness* – or *consecration, community, and conversion*.

The Peccability of the Church

Because the church is populated by sinful human beings, sin and error are a part of its life in this world. Without abandoning hope, our confession acknowledges this sad reality: “The purest Churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated, as to become no Churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan. Nevertheless, there shall be always a Church on earth, to worship God according to his will,” (25.5). Moreover, the confession sets out marks by which we may measure the integrity of the visible church: “This catholic Church hath been sometimes more, sometimes less visible. And particular Churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the Gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them,” (25.4). From these we may conclude that church is *radically peccable* and *ultimately invincible*.

The peccability of the church necessitates *corrective discipline*. The purpose of such discipline – called “church censures,” (WCF 30) – is multifaceted: “the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren, for deterring of others from the like offences, for purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump, for vindicating the honour of Christ, and the holy profession of the Gospel, and for preventing the wrath of God, which might justly fall upon the Church,” (30.3). In pursuing this purpose, the church exercises discipline at three graduated levels: “admonition; suspension from the sacrament of the Lord's Supper for a season; and by excommunication from the Church; according to the nature of the crime, and demerit of the person,” (30.4).

Both the unity and peccability of the church call for *ecclesiastical connections*. The purpose of such connections – manifested in “synods and councils” (WCF 31) – is “the better government, and further edification, of the Church,” (31.1). Appointed and convened by the “overseers and other rulers of particular churches” in the name of Christ, these connectional assemblies exercise several important prerogatives, and their “decrees and determinations, if consonant to the Word of God,

²³⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 5-6.

are to be received with, reverence and submission; not only for their agreement with the Word, but also for the power whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God appointed thereunto in His Word,” (31.2)

Our confession lays two limits on the “decrees and determinations” of ecclesiastical assemblies. First, they may *never be elevated to the level or authority of Scripture*: “All synods or councils, since the Apostles’ times, whether general or particular, may err; and many have erred. Therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith, or practice; but to be used as a help in both,” (31.3; cf. WLC 3, WSC 2). Second, they *must be consistent with the spirituality of the church*: “Synods and councils are to handle, or conclude nothing but that which is ecclesiastical: and are not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the common wealth, unless by way of humble petition in cases extraordinary; or, by way of advice, for satisfaction of conscience, if they be thereunto required by the civil magistrate,” (31.5).

The Resurrection Community

The church, for all its flaws and warts in this life, is a glorious institution. J.I. Packer captures some of this glory in a memorable description:

What is the church? It is the true seed of faithful Abraham, Jew and non-Jew together, chosen by God, justified through faith, and freed from sin for a new life of personal righteousness and mutual ministry. It is the family of a loving heavenly Father, living in hope of inheriting his entire fortune. It is the community of the resurrection, in which the powers of Christ’s historic death and present heavenly life are already at work.²³⁸

It is this concept of a “community of the resurrection” that our confession describes when it speaks “of the communion of the saints,” (WCF 26). United to Jesus “in His graces, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory,” we are thus “united to one another in love, they have communion in each other’s gifts and graces, and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man,” (26.1). The communion of the saints is manifested by “an holy fellowship” in three areas: “the worship of God... spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification; as also in relieving each other in outward things.” In this holy fellowship we are to pursue ecumenical connection “as God offereth opportunity” with “all those who, in every place, call upon the name of the Lord Jesus,” (26.2).

In order to avoid both theological and practical errors in the exercise of this holy fellowship (26.3), the communion of the saints requires wise facilitators to serve as stewards. Who is entrusted with this ministry? Thomas Peck suggests the following:

It was in this form, “in relieving each other in outward things according to their several abilities and necessities” (WCF 26.2), that the communion of saints was first and most conspicuously exhibited in the primitive church; and it was in connection with this form that the deacons first appeared (Acts 6.1-6). They were the deacons of ‘tables,’ as the apostles were deacons of ‘the word.’ The saints had communion with each other in the apostles’ teaching and in breaking of bread and in prayers (Acts 2.42); but they had also communion with each other in ‘outward things’; and this form of communion is that which the narrative enlarges upon in the succeeding verses (44, 45), and reverts to in 4.32-37. The prime aspect, then, of the office of deacon is that of a representative of the communion of saints.²³⁹

²³⁸ Packer, *Knowing God*, 254.

²³⁹ Thomas E. Peck, *Notes on Ecclesiology* (reprint: Taylors, SC: Presbyterian Press, 2005), 198.

Important Questions

1. Following the social contract political philosophy of the Enlightenment, the preamble to the *American Declaration of Independence* reads as follows:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

- a. According to the *Declaration*, what makes civil government legitimate? Per this understanding, all civil governments are ultimately manifestations of what form?
 - b. According to our standards, what makes civil authority legitimate? Per this understanding, all civil governments are ultimately a manifestation of what form?
 - c. How do the differing answers to (a) and (b) lead to different rationales for civil disobedience and/or outright revolution?
2. Suppose a young person in your congregation is considering enlisting or taking a commission in the military, and comes to you asking whether you think such service is biblical. What sort of considerations should be included in that conversation?
 3. American political discourse has a long, bipartisan tradition of criticizing one's political leaders or opponents. How should Christians exercise of this liberty?
 4. Is it impossible for a person to be saved without ever joining the visible church? Is it credible for a professing Christian to refuse to join the visible church?
 5. Why is a low view of the church so common among Western Protestant evangelicals?
 6. Though treated in a separate chapter, church censures are as much a mark of the church's integrity as those markers listed in WCF 25.4. This being the case...
 - a. What must we conclude about a church that never exercises corrective discipline?
 - b. What must we conclude about the necessity of church membership?
 - c. How would you counsel a professing believer who sees the need for neither?
 7. Though it is necessary (WCF 26.2), ecumenicity is difficult. Consider the following:
 - a. How does recognition of the peccability of the church facilitate such efforts?
 - b. How does articulation of the marks of church integrity bound such endeavors?
 8. In what ways can we encourage the communion of the saints in our congregation?

For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony*, 132-147, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
27-29	153-177	85, 88-97

Chapter 20: The Means of Grace

Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 132-147

WCF	WLC	WSC
27-29	153-177	85, 88-97

Introduction

Over the last two sessions, we have considered the three great *institutions* that God has placed in this world: the family, the church, and the state. In this session, we examine the *ordinances* of God – “the outward means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption,” (WSC 85).

We refer to these ordinances as the *means of grace* – the tools through which God works in us. What are the “outward and ordinary” means of grace? “The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption, are his ordinances, especially the word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation,” (WSC 88).

Prayer²⁴⁰

We speak to God in prayer. Prayer is *trust vocalized* (Ps. 62.8). It is “an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies,” (WSC 98). To this definition, two points must be added.

The first point is an explanation of what it means to pray “in the name of Christ.” Here our standards are most helpful: “To pray in the name of Christ is, in obedience to his command, and in confidence on his promises, to ask mercy for his sake; not by bare mentioning of his name, but by drawing our encouragement to pray, and our boldness, strength, and hope of acceptance in prayer, from Christ and his mediation,” (WLC 180). This explains to us why, in the model prayer given to us by the Lord himself (Mt. 6.9-13), his name is not explicitly present. Calvin explains:

First, at the very threshold we meet what I previously mentioned: we ought to offer all prayer to God only in Christ’s name, as it cannot be agreeable to him in any other name. For in calling God “Father,” we put forward the name “Christ.” With what confidence would anyone address God as “Father”? Who would break forth into such rashness as to claim for himself the honor of a son of God unless we had been adopted as children of grace in Christ? God both calls himself our Father and would have us so address him. By the great sweetness of this name he frees us from all distrust, since no greater feeling of love can be found elsewhere than in the Father.²⁴¹

The second point is a caution against *trifling with God*. We are to pray with “confidence as children to a father, able and ready to help us,” and yet always “with all holy reverence,” (WSC 100). In prayer we must be respectful and sincere. Girardeau wrote that prayer is to be “the offering up of our real desires unto God – [otherwise] the professed suppliant tampers with the majesty of God, which is offended by his insincerity, or trifles with the omniscience of God, which he must all the while be conscious is able to detect the hypocrisy and to unmask the pretense.”²⁴²

²⁴⁰ Smith’s *Harmony*, 106-118, places the material on prayer in parallel with WCF 21 – “Of Religious Worship, and the Sabbath Day. Here we will offer but a brief summary of that material.

²⁴¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.36.

²⁴² John L. Girardeau, *Life Work and Sermons*, ed. George A. Blackburn (Hess Pubns, 1998), 257-258.

The Word

God speaks to us in his Word. Tim Keller has said it well: “the Bible is in human words, but it’s not human opinion.”²⁴³ For this reason, every time the Word is read, it is actually “the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture,” (WCF 1.10). Likewise, it is the “Spirit of God [who] maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation,” (WSC 89). It is for this reason that we seek God’s illumination when we read Scripture: “Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law,” (Ps. 119.18).

Because the Word carries implicit authority, we are to be very careful about how it is read and heard (WLC 156-157, 160). The Scriptures are to be read “with an high and reverent esteem... with a firm persuasion that they are the very word of God,” (WLC 157). We must read and hear the Word “with diligence, preparation, and prayer; receive it with faith and love, lay it up in our hearts, and practice it in our lives,” (WSC 90). As the Psalmist notes, “I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you,” (Ps. 119.11).

For the same reason, we are to be very careful about the preaching of the Word. The Scriptures should only be preached “by such as are sufficiently gifted, and also duly approved and called to that office,” (WLC 158). Those who thus preach must ever seek to have their preaching *correspond* to the text, *connect* to the congregation, and (by the Spirit’s agency) *create a definite spiritual impression* (159). “The first and primary object of preaching is not only to give information. It is... to produce an impression... We should tell our people to read certain books themselves and get the information there. The business of preaching is to make such knowledge live.”²⁴⁴

The Sacraments

The sacraments are God’s *signs* and *seals*, his *pictures* and *promises*. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are pictures because they are “images... living and symbolical ones which the Lord has consecrated by his Word.”²⁴⁵ Likewise, they are promises because “as a seal unto a bond, or last will and testament, doth both signify the will of whom whose bond or last will and testament it is, and doth also exhibit and convey, confirm and apply, a right unto the things promised and engaged therein.” Consequently, “when the minister doth give forth the signs or outward elements, in the sacramental actions, the Lord doth give forth and convey the things signified unto the worthy receivers.”²⁴⁶

The sacraments are in some sense *mysterious*, yet in no sense are they *magic*. Though “there is, in every sacrament, a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified” (WCF 27.2), “the sacraments become effectual means of salvation, not from any virtue in them, or in him that doth administer them; but only by the blessing of Christ, and the working of his Spirit in them that by faith receive them,” (WSC 92).

Between baptism and the Lord’s Supper, our standards note both *similarities* and *differences*. The following chart summarizes both:

²⁴³ The present author remembers hearing Dr. Keller use this expression in an audio lecture or sermon. However, he does not remember the exact citation.

²⁴⁴ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1987), 360.

²⁴⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.11.13.

²⁴⁶ Thomas Vincent, *Shorter Catechism Explained*, 244.

Similarities (WLC 176)	Differences (WLC 177)
God is the author	
Covenant of grace is sealed	
Convey Christ & his benefits	Which benefits depicted & sealed
Administered only by ordained ministers	Who may partake/receive
Continue until the world's end	How often administered

These similarities and differences of the New Testament sacraments comport well with those present in the Old Testament. Like circumcision, baptism is a sacrament of *initiation* and is given to all who join the covenant community – whether by conversion or birth. Likewise, like Passover, the Lord's Supper is a sacrament of *memorial*.

Baptism

Beyond initiation into the visible church, baptism pours gospel promises onto its recipients:

Benefits (WCF 28.1, WLC 165, WSC 94)	Scripture
The Covenant of Grace	Rom. 4.11
Regeneration	Titus 3.5
Union with Christ in Death, Resurrection, & Eternal Life	Rom. 6.5, Col. 3.1-4
Forgiveness of Sins	Acts 2.38, 22.16
Adoption	Gal. 3.26-27
Engagement to Christ (Newness of Life)	Rom. 6.4

In examining these benefits, note carefully the language of our standards. We do not confess that all of these things are *given* to those who receive baptism. Rather, we confess that all of these things are *signed* and *sealed*. Baptism is a *legal promise*. As such, it represents the will of the giver (God) to give all these things to the proper recipients – those who actually believe. Notice how Peter puts it: “Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, *not as a removal of dirt from the body* but as an *appeal to God for a good conscience*, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,” (1 Pet. 3.21).

Thus baptism is *not a badge of conversion*, but a *tangible outpouring of the gospel*. We give it to the children of believers (WCF 28.4, WLC 166, WSC 95) because we don't ever want them to doubt whether they belong there. God gives the legal promise of the gospel to all who are joined to the community of promise – no matter how they got there. No member of the visible church, adult or child, should ever doubt that Jesus will save them. They already have God's promise of that. It was poured out on them. All they have to do is believe the promise – to trust Jesus.

For this same reason, *because* baptism is an outpouring of the gospel, it is never to be a mere spectator sport. Every time we witness a baptism, we should seek to improve our own (WLC 167).

Regarding the *method* of baptism, our standards tell us what is essential and what is flexible. A minister, lawfully ordained, must use water while invoking the triune name of God (WCF 28.2). Moreover, baptism should not be repeated (28.7). Yet in the *mode* of baptism, our standards allow some flexibility: “Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but Baptism is rightly administered by pouring, or sprinkling water upon the person,” (WCF 28.3). In the proof text cited from Mark 7.4, the verb ‘wash’ is *baptizō* and the noun ‘washing’ is *baptismos*.

The last things to note in this section are our standards' teachings on the *importance* and *efficacy* of baptism. Regarding the former, we can summarize in a sentence: though we don't believe in automatic²⁴⁷ baptismal regeneration, neither do we believe in baptismal rejection (WCF 28.5). Regarding the latter (WCF 28.6), Hodge writes:

²⁴⁷ Roman Catholicism teaches that the sacraments function *ex opere operato* (“from the work done”) – that is, automatically.

The ground taken here is intermediate between two opposite extremes... The extreme held by Papists and Ritualists of baptismal regeneration... Baptism cannot be the only or ordinary means of regeneration, because faith and repentance are the fruits of regeneration, but the prerequisites of [adult] Baptism... Our Standards oppose the other extreme, that Baptism is a mere sign of grace and badge of Christian profession....

Baptism does not only signify, but really and truly seal and convey, grace to those to whom it belongs according to the covenant – that is, to the elect... But that this actual conveyance of the grace sealed is not tied to the moment in which the sacrament is administered, but is made according to the precise provisions as to time and circumstance predetermined in the eternal covenant of grace. So property may be sealed and conveyed in a deed to a minor, but the minor may not actually enter into the fruition of it until such time and upon such conditions as are predetermined in his Father’s will.²⁴⁸

The Lord’s Supper

The Lord’s Supper is given to the church for *remembrance, nourishment, and communion*. “The Lord’s supper is a sacrament of the New Testament, wherein, by giving and receiving bread and wine according to the appointment of Jesus Christ, his death is showed forth and they that worthily communicate feed upon his body and blood, to their spiritual nourishment and growth in grace, have their union and communion with him confirmed; testify and renew their thankfulness, and engagement to God, and their mutual love and fellowship each with other, as members of the same mystical body,” (WLC 168). Calvin describes it “as a mirror, in which we may contemplate Jesus Christ crucified to deliver us from damnation, and risen again to procure righteousness and eternal life for us”²⁴⁹

Having stated the purpose of the Lord’s Supper, our confession goes on to *disavow several errors* (WCF 29.2-6). The Lord’s Supper is not a *real sacrifice*, nor is it a *re-sacrificing* of Christ (29.2). The Lord’s Supper is not to be receive *privately* or only *in part*, nor are the elements to be worshiped (29.3-4). Likewise, though the sacramental union is acknowledged, the elements “in substance and nature... still remain truly and only bread and wine, as they were before,” (29.5). “That doctrine which maintains a change of the substance of bread and wine, into the substance of Christ’s body and blood (commonly called transubstantiation)... is repugnant, not to Scripture alone, but even to common sense, and reason; overthroweth the nature of the sacrament, and hath been, and is, the cause of manifold superstitions; yea, of gross idolatries,” (29.6). Though offensive to some modern sensibilities, this polemical language was well-warranted in its Reformation context. How so? The proto-reformed John Wyclif saw transubstantiation as a sort of “gateway” sin:

It is as if the devil had been scheming to this effect saying, If I can by my vicar Antichrist so far seduce the believers in the Church, as to bring them to deny that this sacrament is bread, and to believe it a contemptible quality without a substance, I may after that, and in the same manner, lead them to believe whatever I may wish, inasmuch as the opposite of such a doctrine is plainly taught, both by the language of Scripture, and by the very senses of mankind.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁸ Hodge, *Confession of Faith*, 350-351.

²⁴⁹ John Calvin, “Treatise on the Lord’s Supper” in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, ed. J.K.S. Reid, *Library of Christian Classics*, vol. 22 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, n.d.), 145.

²⁵⁰ John Wyclif. Quoted in Rudolf Boddensieg, *John Wiclif: Patriot & Reformer* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1884), 130. Boddensieg’s work draws extracts from Wyclif’s *De Veritate Scriptura Sacra*, the *Trialogus*, and the *Wykett*, and from Vaughan’s *Tracts and Treatises of John Wyckliffe*. However, it does not provide individual citations.

Yet if we are to reject transubstantiation, the question yet remains: what is the true view of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper? Since the Reformation, there have been four general views:

View	Real?	How?	Outcome
Zwinglian	N	n/a	Eat just bread, drink just wine
Roman Catholic	Y	Transubstantiation	Eat body of Jesus, drink his blood
Lutheran	Y	Consubstantiation ("in, with, and under")	Eat bread and the body of Jesus, drink wine and the blood of Jesus
Reformed (WCF 29.7, WLC 170)	Y	Spiritual by Faith	Bread and wine in the mouth, Body and blood in the heart

What does it mean to say that Christ's body and blood are "spiritually present to the faith of the receiver, no less truly and really than the elements themselves are to their outward senses," and that therefore believers "feed upon the body and blood of Christ, not after a corporal and carnal manner, but in a spiritual manner, yet truly and really"? Martin Bucer writes:

We confess that the spiritual life which Christ bestows upon us does not rest on the fact that he vivifies us with his Spirit, but that his Spirit makes us participants in the virtue of his vivifying body, by which participation we are fed on eternal life... For though we as pilgrims in mortality are neither included nor contained in the same space with him, yet the efficacy of his Spirit is limited by no bounds, but is able really to unite and bring together into one things that are disjoined in local space. Hence we acknowledge that his Spirit is the bond of our participation in him, but in such manner that he really feeds us with the substance of the body and blood of the Lord to everlasting life, and vivifies us by participation in them.²⁵¹

Robert Letham summarizes Calvin's view as follows:

Calvin's most frequent imagery becomes that of the Holy Spirit uniting us to Christ through faith, and so the *life* of Christ – the risen and ascended Christ – is given to us to nourish us, particularly in the Lord's Supper. At the root of this is that Christ has become one with us in the incarnation, and consequently his flesh receives the life of the Godhead poured into it. From this we receive life in union with him.²⁵²

The Lord's Supper is to be taken seriously. To fail to do so is to invite death (1 Cor. 11.30). For this reason, our standards warn (WCF 29.8) and instruct us as to how to *prepare, partake, and reflect* upon our participation in the sacrament (WLC 171-175). Though this material can be overwhelming, the essence is quite simple – though not always easy:

We have to examine whether we have a true repentance in ourselves and a true faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.... we must hold in firm and hearty confidence the Lord Jesus Christ as our sole righteousness, life and salvation, receiving and accepting the promises which are given us by him as certain and assured; renouncing on the other hand all other confidence, in order that, distrusting ourselves and all other creatures, we may rest fully in him and content ourselves with his grace alone... Moreover, it is to be noted that we cannot desire Jesus Christ without aspiring to the righteousness of God, which consists in self-denial and obedience to his will.²⁵³

²⁵¹ Martin Bucer, *Confession of Faith Concerning the Eucharist in Calvin: Theological Treatises*, 168. Penned by Bucer in 1537, this statement represents Calvin's view.

²⁵² Letham, *Union with Christ*, 114-115.

²⁵³ Calvin, "Treatise," 150-151.

Important Questions

1. One of the current mottos of the mainline United Church of Christ is that “God is still speaking.”²⁵⁴ Many charismatic evangelicals would agree, though in a different sense. Is there any sense in which confessional Presbyterians can agree with this statement?
2. With reference to ministerial calling, Reformed theology typically speaks of both an *internal* and *external* call. How do these elements correspond with what the catechism says about who should preach?
3. How many sacraments exist under the New Testament?
4. How do our standards’ teaching on the “sacramental union” keep us from falling into the error of automatic baptismal regeneration when we read a text like Acts 2.38?
5. In your own words, explain what it means to “improve your baptism.”
6. Consider the following teachings of the Roman Catholic Church on the Lord’s Supper:

In the New Testament, the memorial takes on new meaning. When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, she commemorates Christ’s Passover, and it is made present: the sacrifice Christ offered once for all on the cross remains ever present. As often as the sacrifice of the Cross... is celebrated on the altar, the work of our redemption is carried out.²⁵⁵

The sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are *one single sacrifice*... only the manner of offering is difference... the same Christ who offered himself once in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross is contained and offered in an unbloody manner... this sacrifice is truly propitiatory.²⁵⁶

- a. Why is such teaching “abominably injurious to Christ’s one, only sacrifice, the only propitiation for the all the sins of His elect,” (WCF 29.2; cf. Jn. 19.30)?
7. If an unbeliever takes the Lord’s Supper, do they actually feed on Christ (WCF 29.8)? Nevertheless, are they innocent (1 Cor. 11.27)?
 8. Can a person who struggles with assurance come to the Lord’s Table (WLC 172)?
 9. Who should be warned to stay away from the Lord’s Table (WLC 173)?

Additional Resources

John Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20 (This section contains Calvin’s discussion of prayer.)

John Calvin, “Treatise on the Lord’s Supper”

Paul E. Miller, *A Praying Life*

For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony*, 151-154, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
32-33	84-90	37-38

²⁵⁴ “The Stillspeaking Ministry.” <http://www.ucc.org/god-is-still-speaking/> (accessed August 28, 2013).

²⁵⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1364.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, #1367.

Chapter 21: History's Final Chapter

Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 151-154

WCF	WLC	WSC
32-33	84-90	37-38

Introduction

In the ancient words of Psalm 90.2, Moses writes, “Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.” In our studies in the confessional standards thus far, we have explored what Scripture teaches us about eternity past, the universe as it now stands, and our life therein. Now, in this final session, we turn to what the Bible and our standards teach about eternity future... history's final chapter.

The Great Divorce

The greatest dividing line in the human race is not between those of different languages or skin color, but rather between the ‘righteous’ and the ‘wicked.’ In terms of their physical death, there may appear to be little difference: “the bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption.” Nevertheless, “their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them.” It is at this point of *everlasting, personal consciousness after death*, that the great divorce between the righteous and wicked becomes clear – for it is then that “the souls of the righteous, being then made perfect of holiness, are received into the highest heavens... And the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day,” (WCF 32.1).

We see this division illustrated for us dramatically in our Lord's account²⁵⁷ of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk. 16.19-31). Both men suffer physical death, and afterwards each man experiences continued personal consciousness – Lazarus at rest in heaven, the rich man in torment in hell. Note two things about this passage. Firstly, that a “great chasm has been fixed” (v. 26) between heaven and hell over which there is no bridge. Secondly, that there is no third place between the two: “Beside these two places, for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledgeth none,” (WCF 32.1). The Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory finds no support in the biblical text.

This terrifying doctrine of eternal punishment is one of the chief objections raised by skeptics. How can a loving God punish people forever? Isn't that cruel? Reflecting on these things, Packer writes:

These things are, no doubt, unimaginably dreadful... but they are not arbitrary inflictions; they represent, rather, a conscious growing into the state in which one has chosen to be. The unbeliever has preferred to be by himself, without God, defying God, having God against him, and he shall have his preference. Nobody stands under the wrath of God except those who have chosen to do so. The essence of God's action in wrath is to *give men what they choose*, in all its implications: nothing more, and equally nothing less. God's readiness to respect human choice to this extent may appear disconcerting and even terrifying, but it is plain that his attitude here is supremely just – and is poles apart from the wanton and irresponsible inflicting of pain which is what we mean by cruelty.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁷ We would do well to note that this account is *not* referred to as a parable.

²⁵⁸ Packer, *Knowing God*, 153. See also the excellent chapter on this objection in Keller, *Reason for God*.

Packer's point is crucial. The skeptical objection to hell is based upon two premises. The first is that *eternal felicity is possible apart from God*. Since Eden, man in his rebellion has wanted heaven without God. But there is no such place. Eternity presents man with only two options: God's presence or God's absence. As our confession notes: "then shall the righteous go into everlasting life, and receive that fulness of joy and refreshing, which shall come from the *presence of the Lord*; but the wicked who know not God, and obey not the Gospel of Jesus Christ, shall be cast into eternal torments, and be punished with everlasting destruction from the *presence of the Lord*," (WCF 33.2, emphasis added).

But why must hell be so... *hellish*? Hell must be literal because those who choose God's absence *must have it consistently* – and that means an eternity without life, light, or any restraint on God's wrath. Eternity apart from God cannot contain anything good. Why? Because "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights," (Jas. 1.17; cf. Ps. 16.2).

The distinction between the 'righteous' and the 'wicked' is not a matter of our *moral performance* in this life, but rather a matter of our *legal standing* before God. Those who trust in Christ have been *categorized* among the righteous by definitive sanctification.²⁵⁹ Likewise, the 'wicked' are those "who know not God, and obey not the Gospel of Jesus Christ" – and thus manifest their desire for everlasting separation from God. Thus the difference between the 'righteous' and the 'wicked' is not a question of who has *done* evil (Eccl. 7.20, Rom. 3.23), but rather who is *defined* by it. It is the difference between grace *accepted* or *refused*.

This note of refusal answers the second premise of the skeptic's objection, which assumes that *nobody wants to be in hell*. But what do we see in the account in Luke? Does the rich man express any remorse for his life of selfish indifference to God and others? Even his appeals (vv. 24, 27) are essentially self-centered and amount to making Lazarus his servant. Note finally how he argues with Abraham – even if hell, the rich man is *still trying to play God* – he's still giving orders to heaven (v. 30). Tim Keller describes hell as "the trajectory of a soul, living a self-absorbed, self-centered life, going on and on forever.... [it is] simply one's freely chosen identity apart from God onto a trajectory into infinity."²⁶⁰ C.S. Lewis notes: "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.' All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desire joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock it is opened."²⁶¹

The Public Tribunal

In addition to articulating the great divorce between the righteous and the wicked after death, our standards also speak of the public judgment that awaits all people at the end of history. A last day in the story of this world is coming, at which "such as are found alive shall not die, but be changed: and all the dead shall be raised up, with the self-same bodies... which shall be united again to their souls forever," (WCF 32.2). On this day, God "judge the world in righteousness by Jesus Christ... not only the apostate angels shall be judged, but likewise all persons that have lived upon earth shall appear before the tribunal of Christ, to give an account of their thoughts, words, and deeds; and to receive according to what they have done in the body, whether good or evil," (WCF 33.1).

²⁵⁹ See previous discussion under "Sanctification is Identification" in session 14.

²⁶⁰ Keller, *Reason for God*, 77-78.

²⁶¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), 69.

The purpose of the Day of Judgment is “for the manifestation of the glory of His mercy, in the eternal salvation of the elect; and of His justice, in the damnation of the reprobate, who are wicked and disobedient,” (WCF 33.2). Reflecting on this, Leon Morris writes:

The doctrine of final judgment... stresses man’s accountability and the certainty that justice will finally triumph over all the wrongs which are part and parcel of life here and now. The former gives a dignity to the humblest action, the latter brings calmness and assurance to those in the thick of the battle. This doctrine gives meaning to life.... the Christian view of judgment means that history moves to a goal.... Judgment protects the idea of the triumph of God and good. It is unthinkable that this present conflict between good and evil should last throughout eternity. Judgment means that evil will be disposed of authoritatively, decisively, finally. Judgment means that in the end God’s will will be perfectly done.²⁶²

Our standards reflect in detail upon what will befall both the righteous and the wicked at the tribunal of God (WLC 89-90, WSC 38). Regarding the former, a question is sometimes raised as to what is meant by “openly acknowledged and acquitted” (WLC 90, WSC 38). In what sense are the righteous ‘acquitted’, when they have already received pardon and acceptance at justification (WSC 33) – and when they arrive at the judgment as those considered ‘righteous’?

Scripture teaches us that teach us that justification occurs at the moment of faith (Lk. 15.10, 18.14). It also teaches us that believers arrive at the final judgment in a justified state (Mt. 25.33, Acts 24.15). Therefore, the language of “acknowledged and acquitted” refers to *public vindication*. Theologian Francis Turretin explains it this:

The sentence to be pronounced by the supreme Judge will not be so much a new justification, as the solemn and public declaration of a sentence once passed and its execution by the assignment of the life promised with respect to an innocent person from the preceding justification. Thus it is nothing else than an adjudicatory sentence of the possession of the kingdom of heaven from the right given before through justification. And if works are then brought forward, they are not adduced as the foundation of a new justification to be obtained then, but as signs, marks, and effects of our true faith and of our justification solely by it.²⁶³

Pastoral Cautions & Comforts

Before concluding our study of the intermediate state and the final judgment, we should note both the caution and the comfort in our standards.

The caution respects the timing of the world’s end. On this point, our standards are clear that God will “that day unknown to men, that they may shake off all carnal security, and be prepared to say, Come Lord Jesus, come quickly, Amen,” (WCF 33.3). The moment a person begins to think they can predict the date of the world’s end, they have departed from the words of our Lord himself: “But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father,” (Mk. 13.32).

The comfort respects the believer’s experience of death. In one of the most pastoral moments in our standards, WLC 85 explains why believers, whose sins are forgiven, still die: “The righteous shall be delivered from death itself at the last day and even in death are delivered from the sting and curse of it; so that, although they die, yet it is out of God’s love, to free them perfectly from sin and misery, and to make them capable of further communion with Christ, in glory, which they then enter upon.”

²⁶² Leon Morris, *The Biblical Doctrine of Judgment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 72.

²⁶³ Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 16.10.8 (vol. 2, p. 687).

When we or those under our pastoral care struggle with the justice of a believer's death, we would do well to remember what is in store for those who are in Christ. They go not to a world of darkness and loss, but to a world of love – a world without goodbyes. In one of the most poignant endings ever written in fiction, C.S. Lewis concludes the final volume of *The Chronicles of Narnia* with this description of "Aslan's country":

For us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.²⁶⁴

Who among us can really imagine a life in which we are unable to sin – even in our thoughts? Yet in Christ, it is it is thither that we go. "We cannot mingle with the splendours we see. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumour that it will not always be so. Some day, God willing, we shall get *in*."²⁶⁵ What shall we say to these things? "He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 22.20).

Important Questions

1. Given the enormity of eternal punishment, should a Christian ever engage in "hell jokes"?
2. In his essay "The Weight of Glory," Lewis reminds us, "There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization – these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit – immortal horrors or everlasting splendours."²⁶⁶ How should the reality of final judgment inform how we treat both our brother and our neighbor?

Additional Resources:

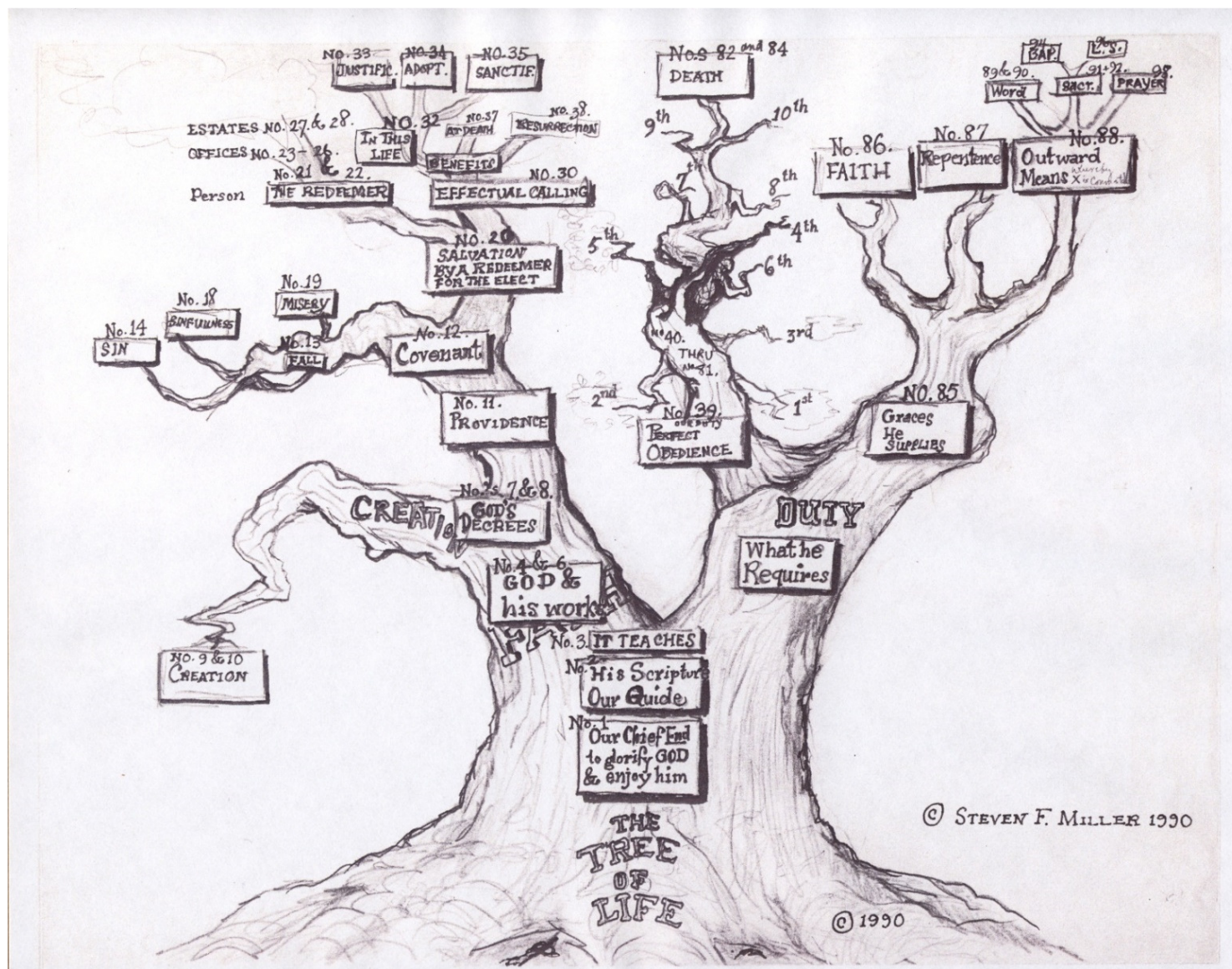
Keller, *The Reason for God*, "How Can a Loving God Send People to Hell?"

²⁶⁴ Lewis, *The Last Battle*, 184.

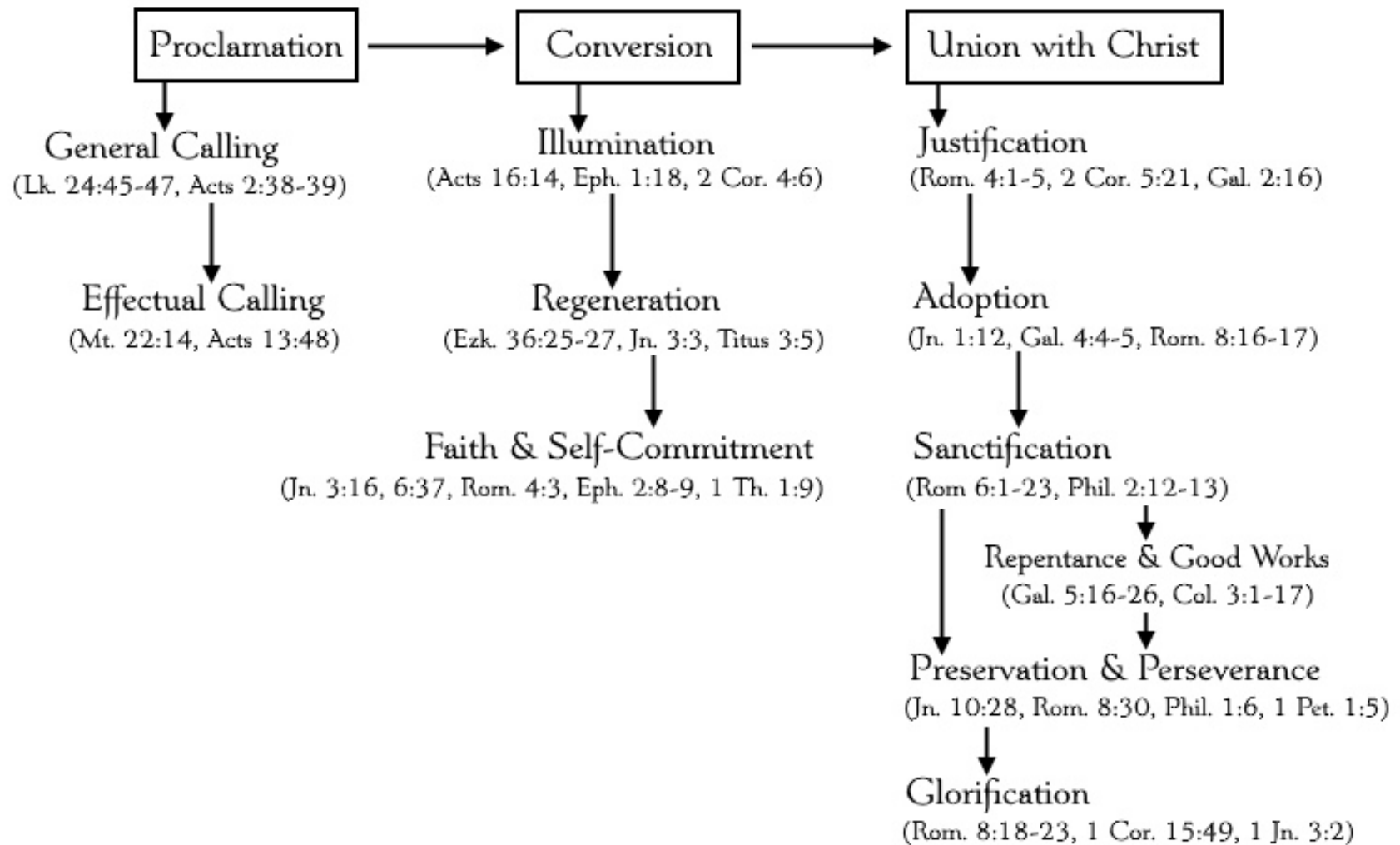
²⁶⁵ C.S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory" in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Macmillan, 1949),

²⁶⁶ Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," 15.

Appendix 1: The Tree of Life



Appendix 2: The Flowchart of Gospel Transformation



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