

# Grace Presbyterian Church: An Introduction to Our Beliefs and Practices

Rev. Andy Wilson

Grace Presbyterian Church  
174 Province Street  
Laconia, NH 03246  
603-528-4747  
[www.gracepcanh.org](http://www.gracepcanh.org)

September 2009

**Grace Presbyterian Church:  
An Introduction to Our Beliefs and Practices**

**Table of Contents:**

Introduction:	Membership at GPC	4
Chapter 1:	What is a Presbyterian Church?	5
Chapter 2:	The Bible	8
Chapter 3:	God, Man, and God's Plan of Salvation	12
Chapter 4:	How Salvation is Applied	17
Chapter 5:	Living as God's Holy People	21
Chapter 6:	The Church's Nature and Government	25
Chapter 7:	The Church's Means of Grace, part 1	29
Chapter 8:	The Church's Means of Grace, part 2	33
Chapter 9:	The Church's Worship and Mission	39
Conclusion:	Counting the Cost	45

## INTRODUCTION

*Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.*  
(1 Timothy 6:12)

The verse cited above teaches us that Christianity is not merely a private belief or experience, but a public profession (“the good confession in the presence of many witnesses”) and a lifelong commitment (“the good fight of faith”). Being a Christian involves taking vows before God in the presence of his people, vows in which you confess your faith in Jesus Christ and promise to live as one of his disciples all the days of your life. This is the basic meaning of church membership.

The elders of our church (the Session) bear the responsibility of making sure, to the best of our ability, that anyone admitted to membership here has a living faith in Jesus Christ. For this reason, those who wish to become members at Grace Presbyterian Church must be able to give a credible profession of their faith in Jesus Christ in an interview with the Session, which includes answering the following questions in the affirmative:

1. Do you acknowledge yourselves to be sinners in the sight of God, justly deserving His displeasure, and without hope save in His sovereign mercy?
2. Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Savior of sinners, and do you receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation as He is offered in the Gospel?
3. Do you now resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as becomes the followers of Christ?
4. Do you promise to support the Church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?
5. Do you submit yourselves to the government and discipline of the Church, and promise to study its purity and peace?

The purpose of this study is to provide basic instruction into the meaning and significance of these five questions. Class participants are asked to read through this study, to attend all class sessions, and to read through the two booklets distributed in class. (*What Is True Conversion?* and *What Is a Reformed Church?*, written by Stephen Smallman)

## CHAPTER 1: WHAT IS A PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH?

### As a Presbyterian Church, We are Reformed

Presbyterian churches trace their roots back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Reformation. The Reformation was not about the introduction of new doctrines, but about the recovery of the doctrines that the apostles preached. The key principles of the Reformation are sometimes summarized by five Latin phrases:

***Sola Scriptura*** means that scripture alone has supreme authority for our beliefs and practices. The Bible has final authority because it is the very Word of God. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 says that “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.” *Sola Scriptura* means that truth is not determined by our spiritual experiences or opinions, but by the God-given words of the Bible. All other forms of authority are subordinate to God’s Word.

***Sola Gratia*** means that salvation is by God’s grace alone. In Ephesians 2:8-9, Paul writes, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” The Bible clearly teaches that there is absolutely nothing that we can do to earn God’s favor. The good works done by Christians are the fruit of God’s grace in their life, but these works cannot earn us any favor from God. Salvation cannot be obtained through good works, because no one can live up to God’s perfect standard of righteousness. Salvation is by God’s grace alone.

***Solus Christus*** means that Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation. Jesus and his cross are at the very center of the Christian religion, because God’s holiness and justice demand that our sins be paid for by death. The only way of salvation is through the mediating work of Jesus Christ. Jesus died on the cross as the substitute for those who believe in him, and he was raised from the dead so that we might be raised to everlasting life in him. Jesus is the only mediator between God and man, as Hebrews 9:15 says: “Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.” *Solus Christus* affirms that Jesus Christ, as he is revealed in the Scriptures, is the only way to God. There is no other way of salvation apart from faith in him.

***Sola Fide*** means that justification (being declared righteous by God) takes place by faith alone. Biblical faith is not about having faith in ourselves, but about having faith in God to graciously provide for the forgiveness of our sins. The only way that we, as sinful creatures, can be saved from God’s just judgment is to trust that Jesus atoned for our sin by his death on the cross and clothes those who believe in him with his perfect righteousness. As Paul wrote in Romans 3:27-28, “Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” *Sola fide* affirms that the only way to lay hold of Christ and his benefits is by faith alone.

***Soli Deo Gloria*** means that God alone is worthy of all glory. We often make the mistake of thinking that God exists in order to meet our needs. But the Bible clearly teaches that this is not true. In Revelation 4, John sees a vision in which the entire universe is revolving around God’s heavenly throne and worshipping him. This vision vividly conveys that the universe exists in order to glorify God. God is the rightful Lord over all the earth. Everything exists for his name’s sake. He receives all the credit for the salvation of his people. To God alone belongs all the glory. This truth needs to be the guiding principle in our worship and in every area of our lives. We exist

for the sake of his glory. Even as we seek the expansion of God's kingdom through missions and evangelism, our focus should not be upon man and his needs, but upon God and his glory. *Soli Deo Gloria* declares that God created the entire universe for the sake of his glory and that our lives are to be lived in order to bring glory to his name.

### **As a Presbyterian Church, We are Confessional**

While we believe that the Bible alone has supreme authority for the church's beliefs and practices, we also believe that the church has been given the responsibility of faithfully teaching the message conveyed in the Bible (see 1 Tim. 3:15). In order to do this, it is important for a church to come to a consensus about what the Bible teaches. In confessional churches, this is done by adopting a set of documents that systematically explain the basic framework of the Bible. Without a recognized confession of faith, a church will experience disunity over disputed doctrines; or it may simply choose to ignore the more controversial portions of Scripture. In our denomination (the Presbyterian Church in America), ministers, elders and deacons are required to subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith, along with its Shorter and Larger Catechisms. We believe that these standards faithfully express the system of doctrine contained in the Scriptures, and we look to them as an important source of doctrinal authority, though they are subordinate to the supreme authority of Holy Scripture.

### **As a Presbyterian Church, Our Ministry is Focused upon the God-Given Means of Grace**

In confessional, Reformed churches, there is less emphasis upon the need to create new methods and programs to help us live out our faith and share it with others. In other words, there is less of a focus upon trying to make the gospel appear relevant in the eyes of modern people. Instead, we place a strong emphasis upon making good use of the things that God has given to the church for the purpose of gathering and nurturing believers. These ordinary "means of grace" are: the Word of God (especially the preaching of the Word); the sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper); and prayer. The most important context in which these means of grace are employed is corporate worship. For this reason, weekly worship on the Lord's Day is at the very heart of the life of our church. In addition, prayer and Bible reading should be a part of daily life for every Christian. By faithfully availing ourselves of these means of grace, we cultivate a lifelong awareness of our utter dependence upon Christ and our constant need for fresh supplies of his grace through his appointed means.

### **Brief History of Presbyterianism in America**

The Reformation produced three basic streams of Protestantism in Continental Europe: the Lutheran Stream; the Reformed Stream; and the Anabaptist Stream. Presbyterianism stems from the Reformed stream.

The name "Presbyterian" comes from the Greek word used in the New Testament to refer to the church's elders. It came to be used to refer to the Reformed churches in England and Scotland. Protestantism had come to England in the aftermath of Henry VIII's revolt against Rome (for personal, not doctrinal, reasons). Presbyterianism emerged in England through the influence of the Puritans, who sought to further purify the Church of England. Presbyterianism came to America through English colonization.

In America, the Civil War caused a North-South split between Presbyterians in 1861, a division that remained for over 100 years. The Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) formed in 1936 in a split with the Northern denomination over the influence of theological liberalism. The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) formed in 1973 in a split with the Southern denomination

over the influence of theological liberalism. The Northern and Southern mainline churches reunified in 1983 to form the Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA). Our church belongs to the PCA.

Today, the PCA is the second largest Presbyterian denomination in America (PCUSA is the biggest). The PCA is a confessional church, subscribing to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms as containing the basic teachings of the Bible on matters of Christian faith and practice. The PCA is a connectional church, with churches linked together into regional presbyteries, and those presbyteries linked together by one General Assembly. This is not a hierarchical, but a connectional, system of government (see chapter 6). It has agencies for both home (Mission to North America) and foreign (Mission to the World) missions, as well as a denominational college (Covenant College) and seminary (Covenant Theological Seminary).

## CHAPTER 2: THE BIBLE

In this lesson, we will use chapter 1 of the Westminster Confession of Faith to explain our doctrine of Scripture. The Westminster Confession of Faith was produced by the Assembly of Divines (ministers) at Westminster in England from 1643-47. This Assembly was convened by the Long Parliament, which was controlled by Presbyterian Puritans. Parliament had given the Assembly the task of bringing about a more thoroughgoing reform to the Church of England. The Confession begins with the doctrine of Scripture because the fundamental issue for any religion is the question of authority.

### The Necessity and Sufficiency of Scripture

*WCF 1:1 Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of His will, which is necessary unto salvation: therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal Himself, and to declare that His will unto His Church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing His will unto His people being now ceased.*

This tells us that Christianity is a revealed religion. That is, the story that it tells is inaccessible apart from God making it known. God makes this revelation in two ways.

First, there is general revelation (“light of nature”). This refers to God’s revelation of himself through nature and history. General revelation comes to all people and gives a general knowledge of God, but it does not reveal the way of salvation.

Second, there is special revelation, which is God’s redemptive revelation, which comes to us in the Bible. It differs from general revelation in that it does not go to all people. Special revelation discloses God’s plan of salvation. Scripture is a sufficient revelation of God’s plan of salvation. We do not need anything else.

In the past, God gave his special, redemptive revelation in various ways (dreams, theophanies, prophets, the priests’ Urim and Thummim, etc.) In the New Testament period, God gave special revelation through the apostles and NT prophets. These offices were not to be perpetual, because they served as foundation-laying offices in Christ’s church. Therefore, these revelation-bearing offices ceased once the foundation of the gospel had been laid (see Heb. 1:1-2; Eph. 2:19ff). Once the final, apostolic witness to Jesus had been committed to writing, no further special revelation was needed.

### The Canon and Inspiration of Scripture

*WCF 1:2 Under the name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all the books of the Old and New Testament, which are these: [lists the 39 OT books and 27 NT books] All which are given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life.*

*WCF 1:3 The books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, 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.*

The Christian canon (“canon” = rule) is comprised of the sixty-six books in the Old and New Testaments. We believe that these books were given by divine inspiration (see 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21). The Scriptures have been breathed out by God. The Holy Spirit superintended over the writing of these documents, even though the human authors wrote from their distinctive experiences, styles, vocabularies, etc.

The Apocryphal books, Jewish texts written in between the time of the OT and NT, are not a part of the Christian canon. We do not accept them as inspired Scripture because the Israelites never adopted them into their canon, and the church received the OT canon from Israel.

### **The Authority of Scripture**

*WCF 1:4 The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or Church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.*

*WCF 1:5 We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture, and the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole, (which is to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God; yet, notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth, and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts.*

*WCF 1:6 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 is the fundamental question in any religion: where is the final locus of authority? The Roman Catholic Church says that the Bible gets its authority from the church, arguing that it was the church that declared the individual books to be inspired. But the Reformers, in union with the testimony of the early church, said that the church “received” the books of the Bible as canonical. The church recognized the authority of the biblical books, but it did not assign divine authority to them. The key criteria used by the church in determining the bounds of the canon were: apostolic authority; antiquity; orthodoxy; and widespread use in the churches.

Because the Bible is God’s Word, it is the principle means by which he conveys his saving grace to us. But not everyone who reads the Bible or hears it preached believes it and places their faith in Jesus Christ. As sinful human beings, we are spiritually dead and are in need of the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit to convince us that the Bible is God’s Word.

### **The Perspicuity (Clarity) of Scripture**

*WCF 1:7 All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed 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 of them.*

Not every passage in the Bible is equally clear, but Scripture is clear in communicating the basic message of salvation. Scripture is a unity, and it never contradicts itself. For this reason, we always need to interpret implicit passages in light of explicit passages.

### **The Inerrancy of Scripture**

*WCF 1:8 The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which, at the time of the writing of it was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God, and, by His singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentical; so as, in all controversies of religion, the Church is finally to appeal unto them. But, because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God, who have right unto and interest in the Scriptures, and are commanded, in the fear of God, to read and search them, therefore they are to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come, that the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship Him in an acceptable manner; and, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope.*

We believe that the Bible is inerrant in its original manuscripts. Copies and translations are not inerrant, but there is abundant textual evidence to assure us that God has indeed preserved the original message of his Word. The textual evidence of ancient manuscript copies assures us that our modern translations are in fact very faithful translations of God's Word.

### **The Interpretation of Scripture**

*WCF 1:9 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.*

Scripture is its own interpreter. There is one divine Author behind the multiple human authors of the biblical books. The Holy Spirit interprets the Word by the Word. This is why theology is so important: it helps us understand biblical revelation as a whole.

### **Scripture and Tradition**

*WCF 1:10 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.*

As a Reformed church, we are committed to the doctrine of *sola scriptura*. That is, we believe that Scripture alone is the final authority in all theological debates, and that Scripture alone is the only infallible rule of faith and life. However, this does not mean that tradition is utterly unimportant. In fact, we can see the importance of tradition by considering the fact that heretics always claim Scriptural support for their teachings. Scripture is the sole source of revelation, but

tradition is useful in helping us to make sure that we are understanding the Bible's message correctly. Neither the church nor tradition serves as an additional source of revelation. However, the church has been made the guardian of the Word (see 1 Tim. 3:13-14; 2 Tim. 1:13-14), and she has the authority to declare its meaning. At the same time, the church's teachings are always subject to the scrutiny of Scripture itself. If a particular doctrine or practice can be shown to be unbiblical, then it must be corrected.

## CHAPTER 3: GOD, MAN, AND GOD'S PLAN OF SALVATION

As we turn to study God's Nature and Works, we begin by affirming that the God of the Bible is the only one who can save us from our sin. We must know God, and his plan of salvation, as he has revealed it to us in his Word, in order to be saved. We are not free to conceive of God by our own imaginings.

### **God and His Attributes**

*WCF 2.1 There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions; immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of His own immutable and most righteous will, for His own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him; and withal, most just, and terrible in His judgments; hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty.*

Christianity is monotheistic. That is, we believe that there is only one true and living God, and this God stands outside of the world that he has made. This God is infinite in being (present everywhere); infinite in perfection (perfect in every respect); Spirit (immaterial in his being); and without passions (he does not have "mood swings," but is always the sum total of all his attributes).

### **The Creator God**

Genesis 1:1 declares that the God of the Bible is the Maker and Sustainer of heaven and earth and all that is in them. The doctrine of creation can be stated as follows: "that free act of God whereby He, according to His sovereign will and for His own glory, in the beginning brought forth the whole visible and invisible universe, without the use of preexistent material, and thus gave it an existence, distinct from His own and yet always dependent on Him."<sup>1</sup> The biblical teaching on creation affirms that God created the world out of nothing, that he created Adam and Eve as unique beings after his own image, and that the opening chapters of the Bible describe actual historical figures and events.

While our denomination affirms the biblical doctrine of creation as stated above, there are several different ways in which Christians in our denomination understand the days of creation in Genesis 1. The "Calendar Day" view sees the six days of creation as regular, 24-hour periods. The "Day-Age" view says that the Hebrew term "day" in Genesis 1 is being used to refer to an undetermined period of time (an age or epoch). The "Literary Framework" view sees the days as a literary device used to arrange God's historical act of creation in order to convey a theological point. The "Analogical Days" view says that the creation week is a chronological week, but that it is not necessary to see the days as 24-hour periods since God is using the human concept of a day's work to communicate something about his work in creating the world. For more on this, see my sermon on Genesis 1:1-2:3, "The Days of Creation," or the PCA Study Committee paper on Creation (available at <http://www.pcahistory.org/creation/report.pdf>).

---

<sup>1</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 129.

### **The Trinity**

The doctrine of the Trinity can be summarized in three points: there is only one true God; this one true God eternally exists in three distinct persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit); these three persons are all fully God. While the word “Trinity” is not used in the Bible, the concept is present in numerous places (see Gen. 1:26; Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:14). The Trinity means that God is personal. The three persons of the Trinity exist eternally in a relationship of perfect harmony and love. The fact that God is personal means that the universe is ultimately personal (contrary to the impersonal universe conceived by atheism or pantheism).

### **God’s Sovereignty**

*WSC 7 What are the decrees of God? A. The decrees of God are, his eternal purpose, according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass.*

God has perfect power over the world that he has made. The Scriptures teach that God controls all things (see Ps. 33:11; 115:3; Acts 2:23). He works through secondary causes to bring about everything that takes place. The focus of God’s plan is on Jesus and the people who are united to him as the new humanity (see Rev. 13:8). He chose his elect before the foundation of the world (see Jn. 6:37, 65; Eph. 1:4-11). God’s plan of redemption is certain, because he is in control over everything. God puts his plan into effect through his works of creation and providence. He created the world out of nothing and created man in his image. He controls his creation and orders its history so that his purposes will be achieved.

### **The Fall of Man**

God created man as good, for the purpose of glorifying and enjoying God forever. At creation, God entered into a Covenant of Life (also called the Covenant of Works) with man, promising life to Adam and his posterity upon the condition of perfect obedience. A divine covenant can be described as a relationship that God sets up with a group of people and guarantees by his word.

Man’s perfection came to an end when Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The doctrine of original sin teaches that Adam acted as our head (representative) when he sinned against God. Thus, all men fell in Adam and are subject to total depravity, which says that everyone is a sinner (see Col. 2:13) and that every aspect of our being is corrupted by sin (mind, emotions, body). In the words of the apostle Paul, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23); and “you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked” (Eph. 2:1-2). Our sin alienates us from God and places us under his just judgment, making us subject to death and eternal separation from him in hell. In our sin, we are “children of wrath” (Eph. 2:3).

### **The Gospel**

The gospel is the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. It is summed up in the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism as follows:

**Q:** What is your only comfort in life and death?

**A:** That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ; who, with His precious blood, has fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that, without the will of

my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, wherefore, by his Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto him.

The next question of the catechism then tells us that there are three things that we need to know and experience in order to have the comfort that the gospel offers:

**Q:** How many things are necessary for you to know, that you in this comfort may live and die happily?

**A:** Three; the first, how great my sins and misery are; the second, how I am delivered from all my sins and misery; the third, how I am to be thankful to God for such deliverance.

Here, then is a concise summary of the gospel: it is a message of guilt, grace, and gratitude. These three components distinguish the gospel from all other religions. As Michael Horton points out:

“there are really only two religions in the world: a religion of human striving to ascend to God through pious works, feelings, attitudes, and experiences; and the Good News of God’s merciful descent to us in His Son. The religions, philosophies, ideologies, and spiritualities of the world only differ on the details. Whether we are talking about the Dalai Lama or Dr. Phil, Islam or Oprah, liberals or conservatives, the most intuitive conviction is that we are good people who need good advice, not helpless sinners who need the Good News.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Christ the Redeemer**

*WSC 20 Did God leave all mankind to perish in the estate of sin and misery? A. God having, out of his mere good pleasure, from all eternity, elected some to everlasting life, did enter into a covenant of grace, to deliver them out of the estate of sin and misery, and to bring them into an estate of salvation by a Redeemer.*

God did not leave man in his fallen estate, but he implemented a plan of salvation, a plan which he first announced in Genesis 3:15 when he said to the serpent: “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.” The rest of OT is a progressive unfolding of this plan of salvation, and the NT is the climactic fulfillment of it.

God’s plan of salvation is also known as the Covenant of Grace, in which God established a relationship between himself and his elect on the basis of the person and work of Christ the Mediator. Before time began, God covenanted with his only Son to save all of those who belong to him by God’s decree of election. In this way, Jesus is the second Adam, acting as the representative head of the new humanity (see 1 Cor. 15:22, 45).

### **The Person of Christ**

*WSC 21 Who is the Redeemer of God's elect? A. The only Redeemer of God's elect is the Lord Jesus Christ, who, being the eternal Son of God, became man, and so was, and continueth to be, God and man in two distinct natures, and one person, for ever.*

---

<sup>2</sup> Michael Horton, *Christless Christianity*, 128.

Jesus is both fully God and fully man. He had to be fully God in order to be our Redeemer, since only as God could he overshadow the sinful nature inherited by Adam and live a perfect life. At the same time, he had to be fully man in order to be our Redeemer, since only as a man could he obey in our place and bear the punishment that our sins deserve. The one true Mediator between God and man must be both fully God and fully man (see 1 Tim. 2:5; 2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15). Jesus will continue to be fully man for all eternity, because he has a resurrected body. This is the basis of our hope of eternal life. We become the new humanity by being united to Jesus, who is both fully God and fully man (see 2 Cor. 5:17; Col. 3:1-4)

### **The Work of Christ: Jesus' Offices as Messiah**

*WSC 23 What offices doth Christ execute as our Redeemer? A. Christ, as our Redeemer, executeth the offices of a prophet, of a priest, and of a king, both in his estate of humiliation and exaltation.*

As the Messiah, Jesus fulfilled three offices that were foreshadowed in the OT: prophet, priest, and king. As a prophet, Jesus reveals God and his plan of salvation (see Jn. 1:18). As a priest, Jesus offers himself as an atoning sacrifice for our sins and makes intercession for us before God (see Heb. 7:24-25). As a king, Jesus subdues us to himself, and rules and defends us (Matt. 28:18).

At the heart of Christ's work was his atonement for our sins. The unifying principle for understanding the atonement is the concept of "obedience." This obedience can be understood in two senses: active and passive. Active obedience refers to how Jesus fulfilled the positive demands of the law on our behalf. Passive obedience refers to how Jesus took on the penal sanctions of the law on our behalf.

The Scriptures use a variety of concepts to explain what Jesus accomplished on the cross. He gave his life as a sacrifice to cover over our sin. He served as a propitiation for our sin, appeasing the wrath of God that is caused by our sin (see Rom. 3:25). His death provides a way of reconciliation, allowing us to be restored to God's favor (see Rom. 5:10). And his death was a redemption, purchasing us from bondage to the curse of the law and the guilt and power of sin (see Mark 10:45). Christ's atonement is perfect and final, so that believers have no remaining liability for their sin (including sins committed after conversion).

The doctrine of limited/definite atonement addresses these questions: For whom did Jesus die? Did Jesus really secure salvation, or did he merely make salvation possible? Limited atonement says that Jesus did not die for the sins of all people, but only for the sins of the elect. If it were true that Jesus died for all people, then his death did not really secure atonement, but only made it possible. If it were true that the atonement was unlimited in scope, then it would be limited in its efficacy, because it would not really secure atonement but only make it possible. The doctrine of limited atonement says that Jesus really died for the sins of those whom God appointed to salvation. This doctrine is based upon the teaching of numerous passages that state that Jesus died for a particular group of people, not for everyone. Examples include:

ESV **Matthew 20:28** even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

ESV **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.<sup>31</sup> What then shall we say to

these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?<sup>32</sup> He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

But, some may ask, what about passages like 1 John 2:2?

**ESV 1 John 2:2** He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

We need to realize that the Bible frequently uses universal language (“all”, “every”, “world”) in senses that do not refer to every single person in the world (see Mk. 1:5; Rom. 5:18). In 1 Jn. 2:2, John is not saying that Jesus paid for the sins of every single person. If that were true, then no one would go to hell, which contradicts Scripture (see Rev. 20:15). Instead, 1 John 2:2 simply means that Jesus’ sacrifice is sufficient for all throughout the world who will believe in him.

And the Scriptures clearly teach that the only people who will believe in Jesus are the elect. This is perfectly consistent with the doctrine of total depravity, because no sinful person can ever choose God. Instead, faith is a gift bestowed by God:

**ESV Ephesians 2:8-9** For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

**ESV Philippians 1:29** For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake

**ESV John 6:44, 65** No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day...And he said, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father."

## CHAPTER 4: HOW SALVATION IS APPLIED

Jesus purchased the redemption of his elect at the cross. That is how God's plan of salvation was accomplished. But how does an elect person become a partaker of what happened at Calvary? This is the question of how salvation is applied. Every Christian needs to understand both the objective accomplishment and the personal application of salvation. We need to be able to answer both of these questions: "What has Christ done for you?" and "What has Christ wrought in you?"<sup>3</sup> Knowledge without experience is not true Christianity, and neither is (purported) experience without knowledge.

The work of Christ is applied to his elect by the power of the Holy Spirit. As Paul writes:

**ESV Ephesians 2:18** For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

In terms of the personal experience of individual Christians, salvation takes place in a variety of ways. However, from an objective standpoint, salvation always involves the same thing. We are made partakers of Christ's benefits by being made partakers of Christ. This is the work of the Holy Spirit.

This week, we will study the logical order in which the Spirit applies Christ's saving work to us. Some of these aspects of salvation happen all together. Some happen in an instant. Some happen over time. Some will not happen until a point in the future. They describe different aspects of salvation, but all are vital parts of the salvation that we have through Christ.

### **The Logical Order of Salvation's Application**

**ESV Romans 8:28** And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.<sup>29</sup> For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.<sup>30</sup> And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

**Foreknowledge** does not mean that God knew beforehand how people would respond to the gospel, and then chose them according to how they would respond. Of course, God did know how people would respond to the gospel in eternity past. However, this cannot be what Paul meant by "foreknew" in Rom. 8, since the text clearly indicates that all of those whom God foreknew were predestined for salvation. Also, it does not say that God foreknew what people would do, but that he foreknew certain people. In the Bible, "knowing" someone is often a way of describing love (Genesis 4:1, "Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain"). Foreknowledge is the biblical term that describes how God personally knew and set his love upon his people even before they were born (see Eph. 1:4).

**Predestination** is the doctrine of unconditional election. It teaches that God's choice of whom he will save is not based on anything within them (see Ex. 33:19; Rom. 9:11, 15-16). Salvation is utterly God's work. God chose his children even before they were born. Only the elect can respond to the gospel with faith. Of course, from our perspective, this does not change the fact that we should treat every non-Christian as someone who might one day turn to Christ.

---

<sup>3</sup> A.N. Martin, *The Practical Implications of Calvinism*, 14-15.

**Effectual calling** is the point in a person's life when they come to faith in Christ. Salvation comes through the outward call of the gospel (Rom. 10:14-17). Many people hear the gospel, but not all respond in faith. Why? Because of total depravity. No one can respond unless God enables them to do so by the working of his Spirit in their lives. This work is sometimes described by the phrase "irresistible grace." It is outlined in these questions from the Shorter Catechism:

*WSC 29 How are we made partakers of the redemption purchased by Christ? A. We are made partakers of the redemption purchased by Christ, by the effectual application of it to us by his Holy Spirit.*

*WSC 30 How doth the Spirit apply to us the redemption purchased by Christ? A. The Spirit applyeth to us the redemption purchased by Christ, by working faith in us, and thereby uniting us to Christ in our effectual calling.*

*WSC 31 What is effectual calling? A. Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel.*

At conversion, the Spirit calls us into a vital, living union with Jesus Christ. This is the ground of the application of all of the other benefits that are ours in Christ. We see this in these passages:

**ESV Ephesians 1:3** Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,

**ESV Colossians 3:1** If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.<sup>2</sup> Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.<sup>3</sup> For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.<sup>4</sup> When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

The next aspect in the order of salvation is **regeneration** or the new birth (see John 3; Eph. 2:4-6). The Holy Spirit works through the outward preaching of the Word to make us spiritually alive (born again). Regeneration precedes faith; it is not a result of faith. We have to be made spiritually alive before we can lay hold of Christ. This is what Jesus taught:

**ESV John 10:26** but you do not believe because you are not part of my flock.

Jesus did not say that they were not a part of his flock because they did not believe. He said that the only ones who will believe in him are those whom the Father has given to be his flock (the elect).

The next aspect in the order of salvation is **faith and repentance**, which are the essential components of conversion. At conversion, we turn from sin and turn to trust in Christ for our salvation. Repentance and faith are interdependent; each occurs in conjunction with the other (see Mk. 1:15). God enables us to repent and believe. It is not something that we can do in our own strength (see Eph. 2:8; Phil. 1:29). Repentance has three parts: admitting our sin; having sorrow at having offended God (not self-pity); turning away from sin. Faith also has three parts: knowing the truth of the gospel; assenting to this truth; trusting in Christ as he is revealed in the gospel. Faith is a result of regeneration. Therefore, faith must come after regeneration takes place (see Jn. 10:26). If we are not born again, we are spiritually dead, and unable to place our faith in Christ. Also, faith precedes justification, because justification is "by faith" (see Gal. 2:16)

Next comes **justification**, in which we are declared righteous in God's sight because Christ has paid for our sin and clothed us in his righteousness. Our sinfulness is credited to Christ and his righteousness is credited to us so that we are reckoned as righteous by God. Closely related to justification is the concept of imputation, which is described in this verse:

**ESV 2 Corinthians 5:21** For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

This does not mean that Christ became a sinner, but that our sins were imputed (reckoned) to him. In the same sense, we are made the righteousness of God in Christ because Christ's righteousness is imputed (reckoned) to us through faith. Justification is not about being made righteous, but about being declared righteous.

**Adoption** ("firstborn among many brothers") is the next aspect of the order of salvation. Upon conversion, we are received into God's family and made heirs of eternal life:

**ESV John 1:12** But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,<sup>13</sup> who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

Logically, we are received into God's family after being justified by faith.

**Sanctification** ("conformed to the image of his Son") is the next step in the order of salvation. It relates to the fact that we have new life and obedience in Christ. Sanctification is a continuous, life-long process of dying to sin and living unto righteousness. It is something that is produced in us by God:

**ESV Philippians 2:12** 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,<sup>13</sup> for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

**Perseverance** in the faith is the next aspect of the order of salvation. Those whom God effectually calls will persevere in faith to the end. They cannot fall away. Those who appear to fall away are proven to never have been saved in the first place. We are commanded to persevere (see Matt. 10:22; Heb. 3:6; 10:23), and yet it is God who preserves us (see John 6:37-40; Phil. 1:6). We make our calling and election sure by persevering in grace (2 Pet. 1:10)

The last step in the order of salvation is **glorification**. This refers to our final, eternal state in heaven. When Christ returns, we will be bodily resurrected and completely freed from sin, fit to dwell with God forever.

### **The "Already-Not Yet" End Times**

Salvation is working towards a goal: the completion of God's work of redeeming his people and bringing about the renewal of all things. The time at which these things will take place is sometimes referred to as "the end times." While we tend to think of the end times as something that belongs entirely to the future, the Bible teaches that the end times have been inaugurated by Jesus' death and resurrection. Numerous Bible passages support the idea that the end times have already been inaugurated:

**ESV 1 Corinthians 10:11** Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Hebrews 9:26b** But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.

<sup>ESV</sup> **2 Corinthians 5:17** Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 John 2:18** Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour.

This NT teaching is summed up by one scholar in these words: “Christ’s death and resurrection through the Spirit launched the end-time new creational kingdom for God’s glory.”<sup>4</sup>

While the end times have begun, they are not yet at their final point. The end times will only be consummated at Jesus’ return. Jesus inaugurated his kingdom at his first coming. He will consummate his kingdom at his second coming. We live in the period in between Jesus’ two comings. The future component of the end times is aptly summarized in these words: “The Second Coming of Christ must be thought of as a single event, which occurs after the great tribulation. When Christ returns, there will be a general resurrection, both of believers and unbelievers. After the resurrection, believers who are then still alive shall be transformed and glorified.”<sup>5</sup> Jesus’ second coming will be preceded by a period of great tribulation for the church (see Mat. 24:29-31). Christ will then return to vindicate his people and judge his enemies (see 1 Thes. 4:16-17). Both believers and unbelievers will be bodily resurrected (see Dan. 12:1-2). Living believers will be transformed and glorified (see 1 Cor. 15:42-58). The final judgment will take place (see Rev. 20:11-15). God will dwell with his people in his renewed creation for all eternity (see Rev. 21-22).

---

<sup>4</sup> G.K. Beale, “The New Testament and New Creation” in *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect*, p. 164.

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, p. 170.

## CHAPTER 5: LIVING AS GOD'S HOLY PEOPLE

### Sanctification: Being Made Holy

*WSC 35 What is sanctification? A. Sanctification is the work of God's free grace, whereby 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.*

Sanctification is a part of the application of redemption that presupposes some of the other steps (e.g. one must be effectually called, regenerated, and justified before he begins to be sanctified). Sanctification is vital because Christians are to be characterized by holiness:

**ESV 1 John 3:9** 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 does not mean that we will experience sinless perfection in this life (see 1 Jn. 1:8; 2:1). Nor does it mean that holiness is something that we achieve by our efforts. Instead, sanctification is an objective reality that is ours by virtue of our union with Christ. It also has to do with our growth in our love for Christ. This love needs to be cultivated over the course of our entire lifetime, because it relates to our capacity to enjoy Christ in heaven. Heaven is about enjoying Christ. The way in which we live our lives here affects our ability to enjoy life in heaven.

### Sanctification and Indwelling Sin

While Christians are freed from sin's guilt and power, we still have indwelling sin (see Rom. 7:14-25). Sanctification focuses upon eliminating sin and making us like Christ. All sin in believers is a contradiction of God's holiness. While Christians bear no condemnation for their sin (see Rom. 8:1), their sin still evokes God's fatherly displeasure (see Eph. 4:30).

Indwelling sin produces a conflict in believers (see Rom. 7:14ff). Spiritual maturity makes us increasingly recoil at our lack of conformity to God's holiness. There is no room for complacency in the Christian life. Indwelling sin does not reign in believers:

**ESV Romans 6:14** For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

"It is one thing for sin to live in us: it is another for us to live in sin."<sup>6</sup> Every Christian needs to grow in the certainty that sin does not reign in him. The indicative (who you are) is the basis of the imperative (how you should live). Sanctification is concerned with the increasing mortification of sin and the increasing cultivation of holiness (see Col. 3:1-17).

At the same time, we must not despair when we fall into sin. Instead,

"If you fall into any gross sin...think not that you must cast away your confidence, and expect nothing but wrath from God and Christ, at least for some time; for thus you would be the more weak, and prone to fall into other sins: but rather strive to believe more confidently, that you have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and that he is the propitiation for our sins. [see 1 Jn. 2:1-2]"<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, p. 145.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Marshall, *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, 157.

We always need to remember that we are saved by grace from beginning to end. And we can find great comfort in knowing that our God is exceedingly patient with his children.

### **The Agent of Sanctification**

Sanctification is part of our salvation. Therefore, it is the work of God. God sanctifies his people (see 1 Thes. 5:23). The Holy Spirit is God's agent of sanctification:

**ESV Romans 8:13** For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

**ESV 2 Corinthians 3:17** Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.<sup>18</sup> And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

We are called to work at our sanctification, but this should not be seen as a cooperative effort. We work because God is at work in us. Our working out of our salvation is evidence that he is at work within us:

**ESV Philippians 2:12** 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,<sup>13</sup> for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

### **The Practice of Sanctification**

Our communion with God is the motivating power and source of our obedience. The Word of God is our source of spiritual life and nourishment:

**ESV Psalm 1:1** Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers;<sup>2</sup> but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.<sup>3</sup> He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.

**ESV John 17:17** Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.

We work out our salvation by imitating Christ (see 1 Cor. 11:1; Eph. 5:1-2; 1 Thes. 1:6; Heb. 12:1-3), engaging in spiritual warfare (see Eph. 6:11-18), and living as pilgrims in this world (see Jn. 17:16; Jas. 4:4; 2 Pet. 3:11-14). The pursuit of godliness is characterized by three things:

- (1) "A holy watchfulness and distrust of oneself;"
- (2) "A consistent prayerfulness;" and
- (3) "A trustful dependence on God to fulfill all that he has purposed."<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> A.N. Martin, *The Practical Implications of Calvinism*, 19-21.

### **God's Law as the Measure of Sanctification**

There are three types of law in the OT: civil, ceremonial, and moral. Civil laws governed Israel as a theocracy and served to foreshadow Christ as the King who would reign forever on David's throne. Ceremonial laws prefigured Christ's redeeming work as the great High Priest for his people. These laws no longer apply because they have been fulfilled in Christ. But the moral laws revealed God's will for how to love him and others. These laws continue to apply. The moral law is summarized in the Ten Commandments.

There are also three "uses" of the moral law: civil, convicting, and guiding. The civil use is a function of common grace. In this sense, the law restrains evil in the wider world. The convicting use exposes our sin and drives us to Christ. In this sense, the law shows us how we fall short of what God expects of us and enables us to see our need for what God has done for us in Christ. The guiding use shows believers God's will for their lives. In this sense, the law is the measure of our growth in grace.

**The first commandment** deals with who we should worship (the object of our worship). It is based upon the truth that there is only one true God and that our entire lives belong to this God. Idolatry takes place when we value anything more than God

**The second commandment** concerns how we should worship (the means of worship). God prescribes how he is to be worshipped in his Word. This is called the Regulative Principle of Worship. We are not free to worship God according to our own wisdom or desires. Everything that we do in worship must have sound biblical warrant. Scripture forbids the worship of God through images (no pictures or images of Jesus in worship).

**The third commandment** concerns hallowing God's name (the manner of worship). It requires us to make a reverent use of everything by which God makes himself known. We may not use God's name in a frivolous manner or approach him in worship in a casual or irreverent manner.

**The fourth commandment** concerns the day of worship (the time of worship). The Sabbath is part of the moral law, not the ceremonial. It is a creation ordinance (see Gen. 2:3; Ex. 20:11). Christians worship on the first day instead of the seventh because Jesus' resurrection marks the beginning of the fulfillment of what the Sabbath signifies. God did not rest on the seventh day because he was tired. He rested because his creative work was complete. He instituted the Sabbath as a sign pointing to the perfect completion of his purposes for the world. Christ's resurrection on a Sunday (the first day of the week) fulfills God's purposes for the world and marks the beginning of the new creation. However, because the new creation is not yet consummated, a future Sabbath still remains (see Heb. 4:9-11). The Christian Sabbath on Sunday is a sign pointing to the "already-not yet" fulfillment of God's purposes for the world. The Sabbath is a day to rest from ordinary labor in order to worship God and be refreshed by his grace.

**The fifth commandment** has to do with submission to authority. It applies beyond the family, because the family is the fundamental social unit of society. We are required to show respect towards all of those the Lord places over us in the family, the church, and society.

**The sixth commandment** concerns the sanctity of life. It forbids all violence, harm, and attack (whether physical or verbal) against "innocent" human life. In this context, "innocent" is used to distinguish from instances where the taking of a human life can be just (e.g. self-defense; capital punishment; military combat). The sixth commandment teaches us that practices such as euthanasia, abortion, and the destruction of embryos for research purposes are immoral.

Positively, this commandment requires us to protect and promote the life of our neighbor, especially those who are unable to speak for themselves.

**The seventh commandment** concerns the sanctity of marriage. Marriage is a covenantal union marked by companionship, fidelity, and self-giving love. This command forbids all sexual activity outside of the marriage relationship (including lust, pornography, homosexuality). Sexual activity outside of marriage is forbidden because it is an attempt to enjoy the benefits of the marriage covenant apart from the responsibility of that covenant. Sexual immorality makes sex into an empty symbol.

**The eighth commandment** has to do with respecting private property. All that we have is given to us by God, so that we are merely stewards. This also means that your daily work is a calling in which you serve the Lord. This commandment prohibits laziness, promotes diligence, requires us to live within our means, and calls us to be content, thankful, and generous. It relates to the biblical command for God's people to give a tithe (10%) of their earnings to support the ministry of the church (see Mal. 3:8-10; 1 Cor. 16:2).

**The ninth commandment** call us to be truthful. It forbids all falsehood, including slander, gossip, and flattery. This also extends to motives. Even when what is said is "true," gossip and tirades are wrong because they are intended to do harm. While Christians are called to be truthful, this commandment does not obligate us to give true information to those who intend to use that information to do harm to others (e.g. a father is not required to tell a strange man where his daughter is).

**The tenth commandment** has to do with the heart. It intensifies all the other commandments by internalizing them. It calls us to be content in God (see Phil. 4:11).

## CHAPTER 6: THE CHURCH'S NATURE AND GOVERNMENT

### The Church Defined

*WCF 25:1 The catholic or universal Church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all.*

*WCF 25:2 The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.*

*WCF 25:3 Unto this catholic visible Church Christ hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life to the end of the world: and doth, by His own presence and Spirit, according to His promise, make them effectual thereunto.*

*WCF 25:4 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.*

*WCF 25:5 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.*

*WCF 25:6 There is no other head of the Church but the Lord Jesus Christ. Nor can the Pope of Rome, in any sense, be head thereof.*

Since the whole Bible is the story of the unfolding of God's plan of redemption, the church is essentially one across the OT and NT (see WCF 25:1). For this reason, the church is the true Israel (see Gen. 12:1-3; Acts 13:32-39; Gal. 3:28-29; 6:15-16; Eph. 2:11-22; Heb. 12:22-24; 1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 21:2).

The church is both visible and invisible. The invisible church is the church from God's perspective. It is the whole number of the elect. God alone knows the hearts of men, so only he has a perfect awareness of who belongs to the invisible church. The visible church is the church from our perspective. It is the whole number of those who profess the true religion. Not everyone who professes to be a Christian really is a Christian. The Bible assumes that professing Christians will be members of a local church.

The church can be described in terms of its three aspects. **The Church Militant** is the church as she lives in this present evil age. In this aspect, the church is at war with the world, the flesh and the devil. **The Church Triumphant** is the church as she dwells with Christ and awaits his return in glory. The departed saints belong to this aspect of the church. **The Church Glorious** is the church in her final state of glory. This aspect will not be realized until the second coming of Christ.

### **The Attributes of the Church (see Nicene Creed)**

The church can also be described in terms of her attributes. The church is **one**: all true Christians are united to Christ and he is their head. (see Eph. 4:4-6) Our union with each other is grounded in our union with Christ. We are called to seek unity, but not a “cheap unity” that ignores serious theological differences. “We cannot exclude those whom [Christ] welcomes, or welcome those whom he excludes.”<sup>9</sup>

The church is also **holy**: in Christ, we have been made holy (see 1 Cor. 1:2). We are set apart from the world to belong to God. We are called to be in the world but not of it. (see Jn. 17:15-16)

The church is also **catholic**, or universal: it is made up of people from all places in the world and all times in history. (see Rev. 7:9)

The church is also **apostolic**: it is built on the foundation of the apostolic testimony. (see Eph. 2:20) The church has been entrusted with this testimony and is called to fulfill the apostolic mission of making disciples of all nations (see Matt. 28:18-20; 1 Tim. 3:15; 2 Tim. 1:13)

### **The Marks of the Church**

What makes a church “apostolic”? It is not merely the claim of apostolic succession. Rather, it is adherence to the doctrine of the apostles (see 1 Cor. 3:10-11; Eph. 2:20; 3:4-5). The gospel is the test of the true church

The true, apostolic church can be distinguished from false churches by three marks. (1) The faithful **preaching** of the Word: it must preach the whole counsel of God in Scripture and have Scripture alone as its final authority (see Jn. 8:31). (2) The faithful administration of the **sacraments**: it must administer the two sacraments according to their institution in Scripture (see Mt. 26:26-30; 28:18-20). (3) The faithful exercise of **discipline**: it must hold its members accountable to Scripture in both their beliefs and behavior; the Word and sacraments are administered with the keys of discipline (see Matt. 16:18-19; 18:15-20). The need for discipline is spelled out in our confession of faith:

*WCF 30.2 To these officers the keys of the kingdom of heaven are committed, by virtue whereof, they have power, respectively, to retain, and remit sins; to shut that kingdom against the impenitent, both by the Word, and censures; and to open it unto penitent sinners, by the ministry of the Gospel; and by absolution from censures, as occasion shall require.*

*WCF 30.3 Church censures are necessary, for 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, if they should suffer His covenant, and the seals thereof, to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders.*

---

<sup>9</sup> Edmund Clowney, *The Church*, p. 97

## The Government of the Church

Jesus Christ is a king, and this means that he has a real kingdom over which he rules. While Christ rules over all the earth, in this age his rule is made visible in the church. In the words of our confession of faith:

*WCF 30.1 The Lord Jesus, as King and Head of His Church, hath therein appointed government, in the hand of Church officers, distinct from the civil magistrate.*

The Presbyterian form of church government is founded upon these two convictions: (1) Jesus is the only head of the church; (2) Jesus has given ministerial and declarative authority to his church. (see Acts 20:28; Eph. 4:8-12) The term Presbyterian comes from one of two interchangeable Greek terms used by the NT to refer to the office of elder: *presbuteros* (translated as “elder”) and *episkopos* (translated as “overseer” or “bishop”). In Presbyterianism, authority is exercised by a plurality of elders in each local church. Local churches are connected to each other and ruled jointly by all of the elders in a given region (Presbytery) and nation(s) (General Assembly).

There are both general and special offices within the church. In a general sense, every Christian holds an office. All Christians are called by God’s name, called to be holy, and called to serve God in their particular callings. Every Christian is a prophet, priest, and king because of his or her union with Christ (see Rev. 1:6). We are all called to the tasks of witness (prophetic office), worship (priestly office), and stewardship (kingly office).

In another sense, God has given special offices through which Jesus shepherds his flock. (see Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:1; Heb. 13:17) These officers provide for the nurture and discipline of the flock. God inwardly calls individuals to these offices, and this call must be recognized by the church. For this reason, officers are chosen by the congregation with the recommendation of existing officers. These officers are then ordained (set apart) to their offices.

There are three continuing special offices in the church (other special offices, such as apostle and prophet, have ceased due to their foundational character – see Eph. 2:20). Teaching Elders (Ministers) shepherd the congregation primarily through preaching and teaching (see 1 Tim. 5:17). Ruling Elders (Governors) shepherd the congregation primarily through exercising oversight (see 1 Cor. 12:28). Deacons care for the physical needs of the church (see Acts 6:1-7; 1 Timothy 3:8-13). In light of the clear teaching of Scripture (see 1 Tim. 2:12), these offices are restricted to qualified men only, and are not open to women. However, both men and women should seek to use their gifts and graces for the edification of the church.

As shepherds of God’s flock, the elders (Teaching Elders and Ruling Elders together) serve as the church’s governing “Session.” They are responsible for: (1) Gathering in the lost; (2) Nurturing believers towards maturity in the faith; (3) Keeping the members of their flock from going astray through instruction and warning; (4) Going after members when they go astray through reproof, correction, and in some cases, church discipline; (5) Protecting members from false doctrine and evil practices by taking care in receiving members and by cultivating the ability to discern between truth and error; (6) Keeping members in the fold, especially during times of brokenness and suffering, through pastoral care and consolation.

The Teaching Elder’s ministry focuses upon four key elements (the “Four ‘P’s of Ministry”<sup>10</sup>):

---

<sup>10</sup> Mark Dever and Paul Alexander, *The Deliberate Church*, chapter 1.

- (1) Preaching (see Rom. 10:17; 2 Tim. 4:2; James 1:18)
- (2) Prayer (see Eph. 1:15-23; Phil. 1:9-12)
- (3) Personal discipleship and instruction in the faith (see Acts 20:20)
- (4) Patience (see 2 Tim. 2:24-25; 4:2)

### **Church Membership**

Every Christian should be a member of a church. The church is the household of faith; the body of Christ. The church is the context in which you profess your faith (see 1 Tim. 6:12). The church is Jesus' instrument to shepherd you (see 1 Pet. 5:1-4; Heb. 13:17). The benefits of membership include: your spiritual nurture; a family to love and serve; a foretaste of eternity. The responsibilities of membership include: the worship of God; serving others; giving to support the church's work. Church members should be ready to commit themselves to the following responsibilities:<sup>11</sup>

1. Making diligent use of the means of grace (see Acts 2:42)
2. Sharing faithfully in the church's worship (see Heb. 10:25)
3. Sharing faithfully in the service of the church (see 1 Cor. 12:4-6)
4. Giving financially to support the church's ministry (see 1 Cor. 16:2)
5. Giving their entire lives to the service of Christ and his kingdom (see Mk. 8:35)

---

<sup>11</sup> Philip G. Ryken, *The Communion of the Saints*, p. 51.

## CHAPTER 7: THE CHURCH'S MEANS OF GRACE, PART 1

### The Means of Grace in General

*WLC 153 What doth God require of us, that we may escape his wrath and curse due to us by reason of the transgression of the law? A. That we may escape the wrath and curse of God due to us by reason of the transgression of the law, he requireth of us repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ, and the diligent use of the outward means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of his mediation.*

*WLC 154 What are the outward means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of his mediation? A. The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to his church the benefits of his mediation, are all his ordinances; especially the word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for their salvation.*

The inward means by which God saves us is faith. But God uses outward means to cultivate faith and convey saving grace. These means of grace are the external instruments by which the Holy Spirit applies the benefits of Christ's redeeming work to God's people. The churches ordinary means of grace are: **(1) the Word; (2) the sacraments; and (3) prayer.**

The Holy Spirit makes the reading and preaching of the Word effectual unto salvation. When God's Word is faithfully preached by those whom he calls to preach it, God speaks to his people (see Rom. 10:14, 17; 1 Cor. 1:21; 2 Tim. 2:15; Heb. 4:2). We should be diligent in our use of God's Word, both in public worship and in private (through Bible reading, meditation, and family worship).

Pastor Wilson preaches from the English Standard Version (ESV), which he highly recommends. The ESV is available in a variety of editions, including two excellent study Bibles: *The Reformation Study Bible*, edited by R.C. Sproul; and *The ESV Study Bible*.

Whenever you read a passage, try to distill its main point into one sentence. You can do this by asking two questions. First, ask: What is this passage talking about? (this helps you identify the theme – for example: faith, God's love, divine judgment, etc.) Then, ask: What is this passage saying about what it is talking about? (this helps you understand the particular contribution this passage makes to what the Bible teaches about a particular theme) Other good questions to ask of any biblical text include: (1) What doctrine(s) are exhibited in this text? (2) How does this passage fit in with the overall message of the Bible? (3) What is this passage telling us to believe and/or do? (4) What experiences do the truths in this passage explain or seek to create or cure? (5) To what present human condition do these truths speak?

Prayer is the means by which we address God. It is at the heart of our relationship with God. John Knox defined the essence of prayer as “earnest and familiar talking with God.” In prayer, we praise God for who he is and what he does, and we seek God's grace. Prayer is efficacious when it is offered in faith. It is the way to avoid temptation (Mk. 14:38) and the way to receive what we need from God (Mt. 6:5-13; 7:7-11; James 4:2). Prayer should be according to God's will, which is why God's Word serves as the guide for our prayers. Prayer is a means by which God gives us what he wants.

The Bible teaches us that certain qualities are reflected in true, effective prayer. First, effective prayer is persistent (see Lk. 18:1-8). Such persistence demonstrates our sense of need and our utter reliance upon God. It also deepens our relationship with God and strengthens our faith. Second, true prayer is done “in the Spirit” (see Eph. 6:18; Rom. 8:26-27). This stands in contrast

to activity done “in the flesh.” Our prayers should not proceed from a selfish heart, but from a reborn heart. Third, true prayer is offered in the name of Jesus (see Jn. 14:12-14). To pray in Jesus’ name is to pray on his behalf; to pray as his representatives on earth. Fourth, true prayer must be according to God’s will (see Mk. 14:32-36). We must submit our desires to God’s will, trusting in his perfect wisdom and providence. Fifth, effective prayer must be offered in faith (see Mk. 11:22-24). This does not mean that we can “name it and claim it” in our prayers. Rather, it means trusting that the Lord really does hear our prayers, and it means watching for how the Lord answers us. He may not answer in the way we want, but he will answer all the same. We need to look for how God answers our prayers, resisting the temptation to think that everything happens only because of secondary causes.

The A.C.T.S. outline for prayer is especially helpful. Spend time in adoration (praising God for who he is and what he does), in confession of sin, in thanking God for his goodness and mercy, and in supplication (making requests: for the leaders of our nation; for the church and its ministry; for the salvation of the lost; for Christians to grow in love, holiness, and sound doctrine; for comfort, healing and help for the afflicted; and for your own needs.)

### **Sacraments in General**

There are two sacraments: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Baptism is the sacrament of admission into the covenant community. It is the sacrament of initiation. The Lord’s Supper is the sacrament of continuing fellowship with Christ in his covenant community. It is the sacrament of renewal.

The term “sacrament” can be defined in a number of ways:

*WCF 27:1 Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ, and His benefits; and to confirm our interest in Him: as also, to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the Church, and the rest of the world; and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to His Word.*

A sacrament is “a testimony of divine grace toward us, confirmed by an outward sign, with mutual attestation of our piety toward him.”<sup>12</sup>

“A sacrament is a sign of *participation in saving grace*. It marks not simply the presence and work of God, but his application of salvation to sinners.”<sup>13</sup>

There are three basic components of a sacrament:

- 1) God’s word of institution (links the sign to what God promises to give through it)
- 2) The outward sign (water; bread and wine)
- 3) The thing signified (Christ; the sacraments promise nothing outside of Christ)

There is a sacramental union between the sign and the reality that it signifies:

---

<sup>12</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.1.

<sup>13</sup> Edmund Clowney, *The Church*, 271.

*WCF 27.2 There is, in every sacrament, a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified: whence it comes to pass, that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other.*

The sign does not become the thing it signifies. However, God doesn't give empty signs. When sacraments are received in faith, we really receive what they promise and represent.

### **Baptism**

Baptism is primarily God's action, not ours. It is something that God does to us. Baptism is about being marked with God's name. To bear God's name is to be united to him. Our union with Christ means forsaking our sins, the world and the devil, in order to be consecrated to the Lord.

Baptism is a sign of the covenant of grace. "Baptism [is]... a sign given at the beginning of the Christian life of what happens to us through the whole of the Christian life. As long as we live here on this earth we are living out our baptism as we more and more die unto sin and live unto God."<sup>14</sup> Baptism is a God-given sign of what the entire Christian life is about. It signifies our union with Christ, our regeneration, the forgiveness of sins, and our new life in Christ.

Baptism is also a seal of the covenant of grace. This means that, when the condition of faith is met, baptism is a God-given guarantee of what it promises and signifies. If we receive the promises offered in baptism in faith, then those things really do belong to us.

Baptism replaces circumcision as the sacrament of initiation into the covenant community. It signifies the same thing that circumcision signified. We see this in Romans 4:11, where Paul says that circumcision was far more than a sign of ethnic identity for the Jews, but that it was a sign and seal "of the righteousness that [Abraham] had by faith while he was still uncircumcised." In addition, Paul uses both circumcision and baptism to describe our union with Christ:

**ESV Colossians 2:11** In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ,<sup>12</sup> having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

As a sacrament, baptism is a means by which God applies the gospel to our lives. It is a "means of grace." The NT teaching on baptism indicates that God uses baptism to effect salvation, not merely to signify it. For example, baptism is described as an instrument by which disciples are made (Mt. 28:19). Baptism is the washing of regeneration (Titus 3:5). Baptism is said to save us (1 Pet. 3:21). We are baptized into Christ (Gal. 3:27). Forgiveness is extended as we repent and are baptized (Acts 2:38). Baptism washes away sins (Acts 22:16). In baptism, we are buried and raised with Christ (Rom. 6:3-4).

This does not mean that saving grace is somehow conveyed by the water itself or by the power of the one who baptizes. Nor does it mean that baptism is inseparably linked to salvation. A person can be saved without ever getting baptized. That was what happened with the thief on the cross. On the other hand, a person can be baptized without ever professing a living faith in Christ.

Still, baptism is used by God as a means of grace in the sense that it is one of the instruments by which he applies the gospel to our lives. Baptism is a *means* of grace, but neither baptism nor the

---

<sup>14</sup> Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship That is Reformed According to Scripture*, p. 175.

one who administers it is an *agent* of grace. There is only one agent of grace: the Holy Spirit. Baptism is made effectual for salvation by God's promise to use it to that end and by the working of the Holy Spirit within the lives of the elect. Like the other means of grace (the Word of God and the Lord's Supper), baptism is only effectual for salvation when it is accompanied (at some point) by faith.

## CHAPTER 8: THE CHURCH'S MEANS OF GRACE, PART 2

### Covenant Theology and Baptism (Infant Baptism)

It is important to realize that the Holy Spirit's use of baptism as a means of grace is not tied to the moment when a person is baptized. In the case of baptized infants, the Holy Spirit uses baptism as one of the means by which He produces saving faith within the elect. Notice the consistency between this understanding of baptism and what the Bible teaches about salvation. Salvation is *ultimately* contingent upon God's grace in election, not upon an individual's profession of faith (see Eph. 1:3-14). While an infant cannot make a profession of faith when he is baptized, the Holy Spirit can and does use baptism as one of the means by which He brings elect infants to saving faith. After all, baptism is the entrance rite into the church. By providentially placing an infant into a Christian family, and by commanding the parents to baptize that child, the Lord graciously gives the child the benefit of being raised in the church.

At the heart of the debate about infant baptism is this question: who is in the covenant? The question about the proper recipients of the sacrament of baptism is a question about who belongs to the church, which is the covenant community of God. B.B. Warfield summarizes the argument in support of infant baptism in these words: "God established His church in the days of Abraham and put children into it. They must remain there until He puts them out. He has nowhere put them out. They are still then members of His church and as such entitled to its ordinances."<sup>15</sup>

Baptism is a sign and seal of God's covenant promise. It must be applied to all who are in covenant with God; to all the recipients of that promise. The key question in the debate between paedobaptists (those who believe in baptizing the infants of believers) and credobaptists (those who believe that only those who can make a profession of faith should be baptized) is this: "Does the covenant of grace in its New Testament administration embrace the children of believing parents just as it did in its Old Testament administration?"<sup>16</sup> "When we ask whether a person should be baptized, the question is not whether he is truly regenerate (which only God knows), but whether he is one to whom God addresses the promise and demand of the covenant."<sup>17</sup>

What does the Bible say about how God forms the covenant community? Should the children of believers be raised as insiders or as outsiders in the covenant community? Should they pray to God as Father? Should we teach them to ask God to forgive them of their sins, even though they are unable to fully understand the gospel and give a credible profession of faith? Should we teach them to pray "in Jesus name," even though this phrase means that we are presenting our requests to God on the basis of Christ's mediating work?

In the OT, children of believers were clearly treated as insiders. When God made his covenant with Abraham, he said that the covenant would also be with Abraham's offspring:

**ESV Genesis 17:7** And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

---

<sup>15</sup> Cited in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, p. 201.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 202.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 229.

Israelite children were given the sign of covenant inclusion (circumcision). They were given this sign when they were eight days old, even though they were unable to make a credible profession of faith.

Nowhere in the NT is this way of defining the covenant community repealed. The NT contains no teaching to indicate that God has changed his way of operating with regard to the children of believers receiving the sign of covenant inclusion. In fact, it is actually reaffirmed:

**ESV Acts 2:38** And Peter said to them, "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.<sup>39</sup> 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."

"The promise" that Peter mentions is the covenant of grace. It is the same promise of salvation that God had made to Abraham and his descendants. The reason Peter includes children as recipients of the promise is because children were included as recipients of the promise when it was given to Abraham. This is how Peter's listeners, who were Jews, would have understood him. As Francis Schaeffer notes, "If Peter did not mean what the Jews understood him to mean in an Old Testament context – that God establishes His covenant not just with believers but with our children also – then there would have been a riot on that day. Or if it had been a polite crowd, there would at least have been hands going up saying, 'Excuse me Peter, what do you mean by that? Could you clarify yourself?' It was such a serious thing for the Jew to be told that God is changing a fundamental way in which He deals with His people."<sup>18</sup>

In both the OT and the NT, the following covenant pattern is revealed: the promises made to believers are extended to their children. The Bible teaches that the family, not the individual, is the most fundamental social unit of the human race, and of the church. The human race is a unity (see Acts 17:24). The world is founded upon a family constitution, not an individualistic one. The unity of the race is the reason why Adam's sin affects all of us (see Rom. 5:12). The unity of the race is the reason why Christ's redemption is applied to all who are united to him by faith (see Eph. 2:10; 3:14-15). In the NT, turning to Christ is not merely an individual act, but a household act (see Acts 10:1, 2, 33, 44; 16:14-15, 31-33; 18:8; 1 Cor. 1:16; 16:15)

Also, children do not get born into particular families by random chance. God brings children into covenant families and uses this corporate framework to build his church. God places children in their families

The Scriptures also say that God claims the children of believers as his own:

**ESV Ezekiel 16:21** that you slaughtered my children and delivered them up as an offering by fire to them?

**ESV 1 Corinthians 7:14** For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

Clearly, the Bible treats the children of believers as covenant insiders. This leads Calvin to write: "the children of believers are baptized not in order that they who were previously strangers to the church may then for the first time become children of God, but rather that, because by the blessing

---

<sup>18</sup> Cited in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, p. 57.

of the promise they already belonged to the body of Christ, they are received into the church with this solemn sign.”<sup>19</sup> When children are born in covenant families, as far as we know, until they give evidence to the contrary, those children are in the covenant, in the household of God, in the faith.

For these reasons, and because the administration of baptism has been given to the church, not to parents or individual Christians, we require the members of our church to present their children for baptism.

The covenant promise also entails serious responsibilities. Children are a great blessing and a great responsibility. Children should not be treated as a burden, but as a heritage from the Lord (see Ps. 127:3). Christian parents are commanded to instruct their children about God and His ways. They are to teach them to trust in Christ alone for their salvation, calling them to repentance and faith. It is the Lord’s intention to work through the Christian family “to furnish the church with generation after generation of great multitudes of Christian servants and soldiers who reach manhood and womanhood well taught, sturdy in faith, animated by love for God and man, sophisticated in the ways of the world and the Devil, polished in the manners of genuine Christian brotherhood, overshadowed by the specter of the Last Day, nerved to deny themselves and take up their cross so as to be counted worthy of greater exploits for Christ and Kingdom. Currently the church not only suffers a terrible shortage of such other-worldly and resolute Christians, superbly prepared for spiritual warfare, but, in fact, is hemorrhaging its children into the world. Christian evangelism will never make a decisive difference in our culture when it amounts merely in an effort to replace losses due to widespread desertion from our own camp.”<sup>20</sup>

For this reason, parents who present their children for baptism at our church are asked to make these vows before God and his church (from *The Book of Church Order*, 56-5):

1. *Do you acknowledge your child’s need of the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ, and the renewing grace of the Holy Spirit?*
2. *Do you claim God’s covenant promises in (his) behalf, and do you look in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ for (his) salvation, as you do for your own?*
3. *Do you now unreservedly dedicate your child to God, and promise, in humble reliance upon divine grace, that you will endeavor to set before (him) a godly example, that you will pray with and for (him), that you will teach (him) the doctrines of our holy religion, and that you will strive, by all the means of God’s appointment, to bring (him) up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord?*

We encourage parents to be faithful to these vows by cultivating the habit of family worship (see pp. 49-50) and by teaching the catechism to their children (*The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, and the simplified version for younger children, both of which are contained in the *Memory Work Notebook* that we make available to all parents). Children can begin learning the catechism as soon as they learn to talk. The key to catechesis is repetition. Keep on reviewing questions and add new ones as your child is ready. The practice of catechetical instruction is especially helpful because it prevents us from seeing the faith as our own private possession that we are free to transmit however we wish.

---

<sup>19</sup> *Institutes*, 4.15.22.

<sup>20</sup> Robert S. Rayburn, “The Presbyterian Doctrines of Covenant Children, Covenant Nurture, and Covenant Succession.” *Presbyterion* 22.2.

## The Lord's Supper

In the Lord's Supper, true believers "do then also, inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally but spiritually, receive, and feed upon, Christ crucified, and all benefits of His death: the body and blood of Christ being then, not corporally or carnally, in, with, or under the bread and wine; yet, as really, but spiritually, present to the faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves are to their outward senses." (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 29.7) God does not give empty signs. When God-given signs are received in faith, we receive the things that those signs represent. When we receive the Lord's Supper believing that Jesus died for our sins, we really receive Jesus and all His saving benefits. The bread and wine are still just bread and wine, but they are used as a means by which the Holy Spirit unites us to Jesus and regularly renews us in our relationship with Him.

God gives sacraments (the other New Testament sacrament is baptism) in order to confirm what he promises to us in his Word. In the sacraments, God condescends to our weakness, knowing that it is difficult for us to believe things that we cannot see. One 16<sup>th</sup> century minister explained it this way: "Why then is the sacrament appointed? Not that you may get any new thing, but that you may get the same thing better than you had it in the Word. The sacrament is appointed that we may get a better hold of Christ than we got in the simple Word... The sacraments ... serve to seal up and confirm the truth that is in the Word... Although you believed the evidence before, yet by the seal, you believe it better... for the more the outward senses are awakened, the more is the inward heart and mind persuaded to believe... The Word is appointed to work belief, and the sacrament is appointed to confirm you in this belief." (Robert Bruce, *The Mystery of the Lord's Supper*, 64-5). We get a better hold on Christ in the sacraments because they awaken our outward senses to the spiritual realities presented to us in the gospel.

The fact that the Lord's Supper is more than a bare sign is made evident in 1 Corinthians 10:14-22, where Paul exhorts the Corinthian Christians to flee from the idolatrous pagan sacrificial meals of their culture. He warns them that those who partake of those meals are actually having fellowship with the demons that stand behind the idols. The context shows that this argument is based upon Paul's understanding of the nature of the Lord's Supper. In verse 16, Paul refers to the Lord's Supper as an actual participation (the Greek term is *koinonia*) in the body and blood of Christ. To have *koinonia* in Christ is to have a common share in His life, death, and resurrection. This tells us that the Lord's Supper is more than just a reminder, but a means by which true believers are strengthened in our union with Christ. This is further emphasized in verse 18, where Paul points out that the Old Testament believers who ate the animal sacrifices were made participants in the benefits provided by those sacrifices. In the same sense, when we partake of the bread and wine in faith, we appropriate Christ and the benefits of His death for our continued spiritual nourishment. The Holy Spirit really uses the bread and wine to unite us to Jesus.

Because the Lord's Supper signifies and seals the communion that exists between Christ and his people, it is a meal for Christians only. Scripture warns that those who partake of the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner do themselves spiritual harm (see 1 Cor. 11:29). For this reason, at our church the Lord's table is open to those who bear these three New Testament marks of Christian identity: (1) You must have received the sacrament of baptism from a Christian church (see Mt. 28:19); (2) You must have faith in Christ alone for your salvation (see Acts 4:12); (3) You must have been admitted to the Lord's table by a gospel-believing church upon your profession of faith in Christ and continued submission to Him as a faithful member of His church (see 1 Tim. 6:12; Heb. 13:17; 1 Cor. 11:27-29). While some might object to this third requirement, we believe that it is a necessary corrective to a prevalent misunderstanding. Many professing Christians seem to believe that the idea of church membership is not a necessary element of Christian discipleship.

But this view runs contrary to the teaching of Scripture. How is it possible for elders to shepherd a flock whose members are undefined? How is it possible for the church to exercise discipline over those who are not formally under its authority? (see Acts 20:28; Heb. 13:17) Furthermore, Jesus' teachings show that the church, not the individual believer, has been entrusted with the task of preserving and proclaiming the gospel. When a person responds to the gospel in faith, the church has the authority to declare that, as far as it is able to tell, that person's sins are forgiven and he or she is a member of God's kingdom (see Mt. 16:18-19; Jn. 20:23). When the idea of church membership is seen as an optional aspect of discipleship, the meaning of the gospel becomes subject to redefinition by every individual who professes faith in Christ. This is why we believe that the church, not private consciences, should grant access to the Lord's table.

We celebrate the Lord's Supper every Sunday at our evening service and on the first Sunday of the month in our morning service. There are three main arguments in favor of a weekly celebration of this sacrament. First, the evidence from the New Testament indicates that the early church celebrated the Lord's Supper as a regular part of their worship on the Lord's Day (see Acts 2:42; 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:17-34). In fact, there is nothing in the New Testament to suggest that anything less than weekly observance of this sacrament is the norm. Second, the fact that the Lord's Supper is an objective means of grace, and not merely a sign, strongly favors a weekly celebration of the sacrament. If God really confers an objective spiritual benefit to true believers in this sacrament, then we ought to avail ourselves of it every week. Third, weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper is most consistent with the fact that the main purpose of corporate worship is covenant renewal. In worship, God graciously draws us into His saving presence to renew us in our relationship with Him. The Lord's Supper is the point in the service where our covenant relationship with the Lord is celebrated as a relationship of genuine "communion." It is the climax of the service of covenant renewal. In light of these factors, we can understand why John Calvin said that this sacrament should be celebrated "at least once a week" (*Institutes*, 4.17.43).

Some might ask, 'Doesn't weekly communion run the risk of making it a dead ritual?' But the same could be said of any part of worship, including singing, praying, and listening to sermons. We do not limit the frequency of those things. Why do so with regard to the Lord's Supper? It is true that rituals can be done in an empty and formalistic manner. But in the OT, when God rebuked Israel for their vain and empty sacrifices, He did not tell them to stop offering sacrifices altogether. Rather, He called for their hearts to be renewed so their worship could be acceptable in His sight. The way to keep something from becoming a dead ritual is not to limit how often we do it but to keep watch over our hearts and be sure that we are sincerely engaged in what we are doing.

Others might ask, 'Doesn't weekly communion run the risk of confusing our beliefs with those of the Roman Catholic Church?' But actually, the opposite is true. Weekly communion provides us with more opportunities to teach the Reformed doctrine of the Lord's Supper. Also, it is a mistake to reject something just because it is a part of Roman Catholic practice. For example, the Roman Catholic Church baptizes infants, but this does not cause us to reject the notion of infant baptism. In the same manner, our disagreements with aspects of the Roman Church's doctrine of the Lord's Supper should not cause us to reject the notion of weekly communion.

We use real wine in our celebration of the Lord's Supper because Jesus used wine, not grape juice, when he instituted this sacrament. Though some have tried to argue that the wine that Jesus used was unfermented, such arguments cannot withstand scrutiny. For one thing, in the days before modern preservation techniques, it would have been impossible to have unfermented grape juice on hand at all times. In addition, the meal at which Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper was the Passover, at which real wine was used. Jesus used wine as the symbol of the new covenant in His blood because of its symbolic value. Its bitter taste makes it a good reminder of the cost paid to

secure our redemption. It is also a drink of celebration, a drink that we will share with Christ at the great feast on the day of His return (see Matthew 26:29). Grape juice does not have the same symbolic value as wine.

Why do so many American churches use grape juice? The reason dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century temperance movement, which argued that alcohol should be outlawed altogether because of its potential for abuse. But this is not a Biblical rationale. The Bible does not prohibit things because of their potential for misuse. Jesus certainly knew that wine could be abused, but this did not prevent Him from commanding its use in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

Some may ask, 'What about alcoholics? Couldn't we cause a recovering alcoholic to fall off the wagon by offering wine in the Lord's Supper?' However, contrary to our culture's way of thinking, the Bible does not view alcoholism as a disease, but as a sinful behavior. This means that it is a behavior from which the gospel can set a person free. As with other sins of over-indulgence, the biblical solution is not abstinence but Spirit-worked self-control. Ultimately, to blame the use of alcohol in the Lord's Supper for a person's abuse of alcohol is to condemn Jesus, because it was Jesus who instituted this sacrament by using wine.

## CHAPTER 9: THE CHURCH'S WORSHIP AND MISSION

### The Church's Worship

God created us to worship and serve him, and to find our greatest happiness in doing so. While sin has severed humanity from God, the church is the community that God has qualified to enter into fellowship with himself through the shed blood of Jesus Christ. It is in worship that we are made especially aware of the privileges and responsibilities that we have as his covenant people. For this reason, worship is the central act of Christian piety, beginning with corporate worship on the Lord's Day and extending into worship in private and in families. The Scriptures command Christians to regularly attend public worship:

<sup>ESV</sup> **Hebrews 10:25** not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

In corporate worship each week, God graciously draws us into His saving presence to work among us through His appointed means of grace (the Word, sacraments, and prayer), reminding us of what He has done, continues to do, and will do for us in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Worship is a service in which God renews us in our covenant relationship with him.

Worship needs to be regulated by God's Word. (see Lev. 10:1-2) Therefore, we are not free to worship the Lord in whatever manner pleases us. Biblical worship bears the following characteristics: (1) It is God-centered, not focused upon our feelings and needs. (2) It is covenantal: a time in which we renew our allegiance to and love for God. (3) It is reverent, because the God whom we worship is majestic and glorious. (4) It is a dialogue between God and his people. (5) It is corporate and participatory, and not spectator- or entertainment-oriented.

Because corporate worship is a covenant renewal service, the five segments of our worship service reflect the five-fold pattern found in Biblical covenants. (see the order of worship in Leviticus 9, the first worship service in the tabernacle) Notice that the emphasis in each segment is upon what the Lord does for us, reminding us that our actions in worship are always a response to the Lord's gracious actions on our behalf. The five segments of our worship service are: (1) **The Lord Calls His People**: The service begins with God calling us because this is always the first part of Biblical covenants. God initiates salvation by effectually summoning His people into His saving presence. (2) **The Lord Cleanses His People**: Through Christ's atoning work, God provides the cleansing we need if we are to live in fellowship with Him. (3) **The Lord Consecrates His People**: Through His Holy Spirit and His Word, God conforms us to the image of His Son, making us fit for fellowship with Him. (4) **The Lord Communes with His People**: God invites us to dine with Him at His table, where He strengthens us through the sacrament of Jesus' body and blood. (5) **The Lord Commissions His People**: Having been renewed as God's people, we go forth in God's presence with His blessing, that He might be glorified in everything we do, say, and think.

Worship is not limited to what takes place at a church building on Sundays. Our entire lives are to be offered up as worship to the Lord:

<sup>ESV</sup> **Romans 12:1** I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

In order to ensure that our devotion to the Lord extends into every area of life, the Bible instructs us to cultivate family piety:

**ESV Deuteronomy 6:6** And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.<sup>7</sup> You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.

And the Bible also instructs us to cultivate individual piety:

**ESV Matthew 6:6** But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

All Christians should worship the Lord in their private homes and families every day of the week (see WCF 21.6). Private worship focuses primarily upon prayer, Bible reading, and meditation, with singing as another helpful element. Family worship requires a daily time when the entire family can be present (after dinner can work well). Be consistent, and keep it simple, with these basic components:

1. **Sing a hymn(s) together.** You may want to sing the hymns that will be sung in worship that week, which are printed in the previous week's bulletin.
2. **Read a portion of Scripture together.** You may want to spend time reading and discussing the passages that will be preached that week, which are printed in the previous week's bulletin. If you have young children, you may want to read from a good Bible story book, such as *The Child's Story Bible* by Catherine Vos. Adults and older children might benefit from using a devotional such as *Tabletalk*. Spend a few moments **explaining and asking questions** about the basic elements of the passage that you have read (see p. 35 for basic Bible study questions).
3. Spend a few moments **reviewing catechism and memory verses** (you might also make catechism an activity for other times of the day – such as time spent in the car, etc.)
4. **Pray together**, responding to what you have learned about God from his Word, and praying for the spiritual growth of your family, for non-Christian family and friends to be brought to saving faith, for your church's ministry, for special needs within your family, church, or acquaintances. Pray for the GPC Family of the Week, Church of the Week, and Missionary of the Week, printed in the previous week's bulletin.

### **Music in Worship**

Music can be a divisive issue. While we do not want this to be the case at our church, we do want our members to understand the reason why we do what we do with respect to music at our church. We want our congregation to understand why we choose to sing certain kinds of songs and not others. One of the main reasons given by churches that embrace new forms of music is the argument that it is necessary to do so in order to be "relevant." But one problem with this mindset is that our attempts at relevance can often result in cultural accommodation and compromise. Another is that the attempt to be relevant will always exclude someone: some people will love a particular kind of music, while others will hate it. For this reason, music should not be used as an evangelistic "hook" for a particular group that we want to target. Instead, music is to be a means by which we give praise and thanks to God, and a means by which God's Word dwells richly within us (see Colossians 3:16).

In many churches today, musical styles are seen as value-neutral and capable of being filled with either good or bad content. The assumption is that the Bible has little, if anything, to say about the musical styles employed in worship, and that any style can be used as long as it is filled with "biblical" content. This assumption may be widely held, but it is simply not true. While the Bible may not contain any explicit teachings about musical styles, it does contain numerous principles that are relevant to this matter. And it is extremely important that we listen to what the Scriptures

teach in this area, because music has great power. As with any other aspect of the creation, this power can be used for good purposes or for bad purposes.

Consider seven biblical insights that relate to the use of music in the church's life and worship. First, we live in a culture in which music is primarily seen as a product for consumption, rather than an activity in which we participate. Music is often used as background for some other activity (driving, exercising, shopping, studying, etc.) It is employed in order to set, alter, or reinforce a particular mood. As a result, we expect music to affect our emotions while requiring very little thought, reflection, or conscious awareness. This has caused many Christians to expect worship music to function in the same way. We want worship music to have an immediate impact upon our emotions, while requiring minimal mental effort and engagement. This mindset is problematic because the Bible calls Christians to worship and love God with our entire being, including both the heart and the mind. (see 1 Cor. 14:15b) We need to be aware of our culture's tendency to use music to manipulate emotions, and we should strive to use the kind of worship songs that encourage us to worship God with both our hearts and our minds.

Second, the Bible also shows us that the musicians who served in Israel's temple were faithful believers who were highly skilled as musicians and well-trained as theologians (they were taken from the Levites, Israel's priestly tribe – see 1 Chron. 25:7). While not every pastor has musical skill, he should have a sound grasp of Christian doctrine and a decent understanding of what the Bible teaches about worship. For this reason, the pastor, working together with the church's elders, must maintain leadership over the musical component of the church's worship. When trained musicians are used to help support the congregation in its singing, they should always remain under the leadership of the church's session (the pastor and elders). In addition, church musicians should be faithful Christians, should have sufficient musical skill to be a help to the congregation, and should understand that they are to render their musical service to the glory of God (not for personal glory).

Third, the Bible teaches that music is a vital aspect of the Christian life. While the Bible provides us with very little information about what heaven will look like, one thing that it does tell us is that singing is an activity in which God's people will be engaged for all eternity. (see Rev. 5:13) For this reason, all Christians should sing. Men especially need to exhibit musical leadership in their families by being men who sing. Every church home should have at least one copy of the church's Hymnal and Psalter, and singing should be a regular part of life, along with Bible reading and prayer.

Fourth, the Bible's emphasis upon reverence in worship indicates that the musical styles used in worship are not merely a matter of personal taste. Music itself, apart from its lyrics, conveys meaning. Different forms of music serve different purposes, and not all of them are acceptable for use in the worship of God. Worship music should not foster a sentimental practice of the Christian faith (to be 'sentimental' is to engage the emotions in a superficial manner, apart from an adequate engagement of the intellect). Neither should it encourage a casual attitude about our relationship with God. For this reason, our worship music should foster an atmosphere of God-centered reverence, should be capable of carrying the weighty doctrinal content of Scripture, and should be of high aesthetic quality. (see Heb. 12:28-29)

Fifth, the Bible clearly teaches that the songs that we sing in worship are a means by which God's Word comes to richly indwell us. (Col. 3:16) As Michael Horton notes,

“the main purpose of singing in church is not to express our inner experience, piety, and zeal but to serve each other by making ‘the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing

one another in all wisdom, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. [Col. 3:16]<sup>21</sup>

For this reason, our songs need to be compatible with the threefold task of song in worship: teaching, admonishing, and expressing thanks. Our songs should have lyrics that are faithful to Scripture, convey substantial theological content, and are consistent with the message conveyed by the music itself.

Sixth, the Bible says that wisdom is obtained by listening to our elders and conforming our lives to their teachings. (see Prov. 1:7-9) But in our culture, the voice of tradition is largely rejected, and everything is expected to conform to our personal interests and desires. This is especially evident in our approach to music. In the post-1960's era, much of our culture's thinking about music has been influenced by the sensibilities of rock and pop music. These sensibilities include: an attitude that rejects tradition in favor of that which is new; an impatient and prideful exaltation of youth over older generations; and an emphasis upon impulse and emotion that has little patience for careful reflection.<sup>22</sup> In such a culture, a culture that makes an idol of new-ness and takes its cues from its youth, the church needs to exercise great discernment in how it thinks about music in worship. In light of this cultural context, we should make use of the best music from church history by learning a core set of great hymns.

And seventh, our thinking about music in worship should be mindful of the fact that the goal of Christian discipleship is Christian maturity. (see Col. 1:28) Therefore, the songs that we sing should not encourage a perpetual state of adolescence, but should help move us onward towards maturity in Christ. The biblical Psalms are especially effective in cultivating a mature spirituality, a point that is made in the Preface to the *Trinity Psalter*: "a distinctive piety develops as a result of Psalm-singing, a strong, militant and bold spirituality... Nearly every Psalm refers to the conflict between the righteous and the wicked... The Psalms will stiffen a church accustomed to accommodation and compromise with the world. The Psalms are also... the songs of the *suffering church*. Whenever in the midst of persecution, death, physical illness, depression, or spiritual 'desertions' (as the Puritans called them), the people of God have found unparalleled 'refuge and strength' in the God of the Psalms. At the same time, the 'songs of Scripture' are the hymns of the *church triumphant*. They inspire the church to believe in the ultimate triumph of its cause... Nowhere in Scripture will we find a clearer vision of the triumph of the Gospel. As the church in America finds itself more and more in a hostile environment, it is indeed 'of the Lord' that the congregational singing of the Psalms be revived."

### **The Church's Mission**

Missionary endeavor is not the primary task of the church. It is secondary and subordinate to her chief end: worshipping God. The church's mission is not an end itself. Rather, it is for the purpose of gathering more people to worship the Lord. The church is God's instrument for gathering and perfecting the saints. Her mission is to make disciples of all nations. This mission is seen in a number of NT texts, including:

<sup>ESV</sup> **Acts 1:8** But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

---

<sup>21</sup> Michael Horton, *Christless Christianity*, 229.

<sup>22</sup> See Kenneth Myers, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes*, p. 120.

**ESV Acts 13:48** And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.<sup>49</sup> And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region.

**ESV Matthew 5:14** You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.

**ESV Matthew 28:18** And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.<sup>19</sup> 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,<sup>20</sup> teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

The church's mission is not merely about saving souls. Instead, Jesus called the church to make disciples, people who worship and serve Christ in all of life. (see Rom. 12:1-2)

While the church is called to make disciples of all nations, we need to be wary of the way in which today's church is often encouraged to be "culturally engaged." As Ken Myers writes,

"The widespread desire to be... 'culturally engaged' is often a distraction from the church's mission, not because it takes culture too seriously, but because it has not paid close enough attention to the actual state of our culture... If Christians were *really* culturally engaged, *really* serious about recognizing meaning in forms of cultural expression, they would be much more reluctant to embrace certain cultural trends... The list [of character qualities that the apostle Paul encourages in Titus 2] looks like St. Paul constructed it with the stereotypical Cretan... in mind – impulsive, undisciplined, self-serving, and shameless. The believers in Crete were to take their culture so seriously as to repudiate and counteract it deliberately and zealously. Far from looking like their neighbors in the interest of winsomeness, they are enjoined to live lives that put their neighbors to shame. St. Paul's letter to Titus is a bracing rebuke to much of the vague talk about cultural engagement one hears in so many Christian settings. It displays a magnificently holistic view of faithfulness, in which doctrine, spirituality, action, and sensibilities are interwoven. It recognizes that cultural moods and styles can be enemies of faithfulness."<sup>23</sup>

It is for this reason that Michael Horton cautions,

"No more *translating* the gospel!... Efforts to translate the gospel into contemporary language actually aim at making the gospel not only more understandable but more believable. The problem is that the gospel is so counterintuitive to our fallen pride that it cannot be believed apart from a miracle of divine grace."<sup>24</sup>

We need to remember that only kind of cultural engagement to which the church is called is to be in the world but not of it.

The church's message is the gospel: the good news that God has sent his Son to save the world from sin and death. The messengers are ordained ministers of the gospel, as well as all Christians. The minister of the Word is responsible for the public proclamation of the Word, as well as private instruction in the faith. By visiting people in their homes and instructing them in the faith, ministers can effectively do the work of both evangelizing the lost and nurturing Christians.

---

<sup>23</sup> Ken Myers, "Waiting for Epimenedes," *Touchstone* (Jl/Ag 09) 9-11.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Horton, *Christless Christianity*, 240.

All Christians are responsible for bearing witness to Christ in their daily lives, praying for the church and its mission, and using their gifts to support and promote the church's mission. We are to be ready to give an answer for the hope within us (see 1 Pet. 3:15), and to be humble and gracious in all our dealings with others. We show our love for God by loving others, and the chief way in which we can love other people is by pointing them to Jesus Christ. Christians can engage in the church's missionary task by taking every opportunity to speak of Christ and especially by inviting others to worship.

As we bear witness to Christ, we must remember that God is the one who ultimately calls sinners to repentance and faith. This means that outward persuasion is not the only part of conversion. The inward working of the Holy Spirit is also vital. This is why our witnessing needs to go hand in hand with prayer. True evangelism is completely dependent upon God. Many people hear the gospel outwardly, but it is only in the elect that the Spirit effectually works through the outward proclamation of the Word, "in the hidden depths of the heart, implanting new life and power, effectively dethroning sin and making the sinner both able and willing to respond to the gospel invitation."<sup>25</sup> When we disregard this, we can end up outwardly persuading a person to "decide for Christ" without the internal work of the Spirit actually taking place. This results in a false conversion and a false assurance of salvation.

Unbelievers need to understand their sinfulness before they can truly come to Christ. As J.I. Packer writes, "knowledge and conviction of one's sin, in its guilt, pollution, and ugliness, and of God's displeasure at it, must precede faith, since no one will come to Christ to be saved from sin till he or she knows from what sins salvation is needed...[I]t would be the worst advice possible to tell a troubled person to stop worrying about his sins and trust Christ at once when that person had not yet come to the point of clear-headedly desiring to leave all sinful ways behind and be made holy. To give this advice...before the heart is weaned from sin would be the way to induce false peace and false hopes, and so to produce 'gospel-hypocrites.'"<sup>26</sup> Packer gives an example of such false professions of faith by sighting these words from Richard Baxter, which he wrote about many of the people who regularly attended his church: "[M]ost of them have an ungrounded trust in Christ, hoping that he will pardon, justify, and save them, while the world hath their hearts, and they still live to the flesh. And this trust they take for justifying faith."<sup>27</sup>

The belief that salvation is ultimately dependent upon God's sovereignty in election is not a hindrance to evangelism. On the contrary, this doctrine gives us confidence to boldly proclaim Christ. We trust that those who are "appointed to eternal life" (Acts 13:48) will believe, in God's appointed time

We should also remember that "mission" is not merely about going overseas. We are called to make disciples both near and far. There are unconverted people all over the world. For this reason, we understand "mission" to include our church's local ministry, regional ministry, national ministry, and international ministry.

---

<sup>25</sup> J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, p. 295.

<sup>26</sup> J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, p. 298.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Packer, p. 307.

## CONCLUSION: COUNTING THE COST

Following Jesus Christ is a free, yet costly, endeavor. On the one hand, you can only become one of Jesus' followers by grace alone. On the other hand, following him will cost you dearly: it will cost you your life. This is what Jesus himself taught (see Luke 14:25-33).

The cost of discipleship is reflected in our church's membership vows:

1. Do you acknowledge yourselves to be sinners in the sight of God, justly deserving His displeasure, and without hope save in His sovereign mercy?
2. Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Savior of sinners, and do you receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation as He is offered in the Gospel?
3. Do you now resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as becomes the followers of Christ?
4. Do you promise to support the Church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?
5. Do you submit yourselves to the government and discipline of the Church, and promise to study its purity and peace?

The first two vows say that following Christ will cost you your pride. You have nothing whatsoever to contribute to your salvation. Nothing that you do can merit favor with God. You are utterly dependent upon Jesus Christ's saving work on your behalf. The last three vows say that following Christ will cost you your independence. Your life is no longer your own. You are not free to live your life however you please. You are to live, in every single area of your life, in submission to your Lord. And this submission is not just about your own private exercise of conscience. It also involves submitting to Christ by submitting to the teaching and oversight of his church.

Do you believe these things? Are they true in your life? Have you counted the cost of following Jesus? Have you lost your life (or are you now ready to lose your life) for him and his gospel? If so, then we would be delighted to interview you for membership at our church.