

Notes on the Belgic Confession

During the course of 1996 when Rev C Bouwman was minister of the Church of Kelmscott he conducted a weekly Post-Confession class in which he dealt with the Belgic Confession. One of the "students" took notes which have since been published.

A revised/improved book form edition of these notes is available from;
Pro Ecclesia Bookshop, 222b Jull Street Armadale, Western Australia.

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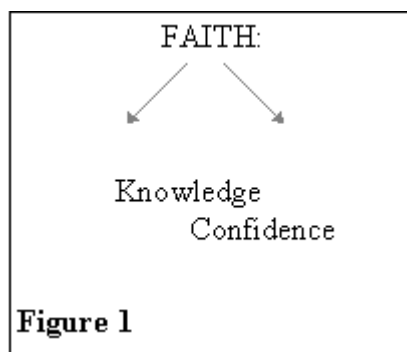
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ARTICLE 1a

FAITH

Article 1 commences with the words, "We all **believe** with the heart and confess with the mouth ..." To believe is the same as to have faith. But what is faith? What does it mean to believe? From Lord's Day 7 we learn that faith has two aspects:



Faith is not the equivalent of knowledge, knowing that there is a God or knowing what the Bible is all about. Although faith does involve knowledge, it involves more than that. Faith also involves **confidence**, meaning that I accept as true for myself all that God says in His Word. See Lord's Day 7.

Faith has a PERSONAL DIMENSION. To have faith means to have a bond with God, a personal relation

between myself and God, in which I know Who God is and what He has done, and that I accept that what He said and what He has done is true for ME. That is what faith is, that is believing: that I *know* and that I *cling* to the reality that God has placed a relation between Himself and me. (Note: these notes contain more discussion of Faith in Article 22.)

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE BELGIC CONFESSION

"We all believe," states Article 1. Who is meant by 'we'? In the first instance this refers to the author, as well as the people around him. To give some colour to this introductory line of Article 1, we need to familiarise ourselves with the situation of those people at the time they made this statement of faith. In what circumstances did they make this statement: "we all believe"?

The Belgic Confession was written in 1561 by Guido deBres. (Refer to the introduction to the Belgic Confession, p. 440 in the *Book of Praise*).

GUIDO DEBRES

Guido deBres was born in 1522 in Bergen, Belgium (then known as the Southern Netherlands). His parents were devote Roman Catholic, and so he received a devote Roman Catholic upbringing. He was born at the time when the Reformation was about to begin. Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the door of the Church in Wittenberg on October 31st, 1517, and in 1521 he was excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church. The reforming movement spawned by Luther eventually affected also the lower lands of the Netherlands, including Bergen. By the age of 24 young Guido deBres was a convinced Protestant and had joined the Protestant reformation in Bergen.

EXILE AND TRAINING: 1548-1552

In 1548 a group of four people, consisting of two ministers and their wives, spent a few days in Bergen while journeying from Geneva to England. The men were ministers of the Protestant faith, and spoke with some of the Protestants in Bergen. This group had scarcely left Bergen when one of the men and the two women were arrested; the other minister was captured later. Both ministers however were publicly burned at the stake because of their Protestant faith, and one of the women was buried alive. (What happened to the second woman is not certain). While the one minister was being burned, Franciscan monks reminded the crowd that this man was possessed of the devil. With the fires burning at his feet, the minister replied with the words of Ps 6:5 (rhymed):

"Depart from me, transgressors.
Flee now, all you oppressors;
The Lord did heed my cry!
He heard my supplication,
My plea for consolation,
And with His help is nigh."

One need have but little imagination to appreciate that this incident could not possibly have left deBres (and other Protestants with him) cold. Was this the cost of breaking with the Roman Catholic Church?! Was the price of one's life really a price worth paying for the Protestant faith?!

That the cost of being faithful to Scripture was indeed high was further driven home to the Protestants of town. It appears that the reaction of the town to this event was such that the authorities became aware of the fact that a Protestant Church was flourishing in town. Up to this point in time this church had worked 'underground,' but, now that its presence had become apparent, persecution broke out. Again the faithful, young deBres included, had to face the question: were the riches of believing God's Word in Scripture really worth persecution??

In the face of the persecution, deBres did not give up his new found faith. Instead, he left his home town and went to London in 1548 and lived there till 1552. During his time in London he came into contact

with some other leading Reformers of the time, such as Maarten Micron, Johannes a Lasco, and Johannes Utenhove. During this time deBres received his 'training' to become a preacher of the Gospel. What Satan sought to achieve by disbanding and persecuting the Church, God worked for good.

RETURN TO THE NETHERLANDS (RIJSSEL): 1552-1556

In 1552 deBres left London and went to Rijssel, a town close to Bergen. Persecution was still very much a reality. His predecessor in Rijssel, Pierre Brully, had been burned at the stake. It was certainly far from exciting to become a minister in such circumstances. Yet deBres did it! DeBres proclaimed the gospel in Rijssel, but during his four year stay there, fierce persecution forced him to do his work secretly.

EXILE IN GENEVA, FURTHER TRAINING, MARRIAGE

In reaction to the persecution in the Netherlands, deBres went in 1556 to Geneva where, amongst others, he met Calvin and spent time under his tutelage. Here, we may say, deBres completed the training he needed for his future work. In 1559 he married Catherine Ramon.

RETURN TO THE NETHERLANDS (DOORNIK): 1559-1561

He returned to the Netherlands in 1559, and settled in a town called Doornik, where he was a minister for 3 years. This too was a period of underground work, due to the threat of persecution. During this time he brought the gospel to the members of his congregation, though not in the conventional way of preaching to the flock on Sunday. The hatred of the authorities for all things Protestant prevented the congregation from meeting together for public worship. Instead, under the cover of darkness deBres went from home to home where people met in small groups of 6 to 12 people. DeBres opened the Scripture, explained it, encouraged his listeners and then went on his way again. The congregation members did not even know his real name.

As a result of his work, a considerable number of residents in Doornik embraced the faith, including also some leading figures in town. As a result, some of the Protestant people in town considered their numbers to be adequately substantial to go public. They did so, singing psalms openly in the streets. However, this provoked the authorities, and the troops were sent in. Just prior to this, deBres, in 1561, wrote an introduction to the confession he had been working on during the past few months. Now he tossed a copy of this Confession, together with the Introduction, over the wall of the regent's home in Doornik, who in turn passed it on to King Philip II. DeBres' aim was to make clear that "*the adherents of the Reformed faith were no rebels, as was laid to their charge, but law-abiding citizens who professed the true Christian doctrine according to the Holy Scriptures,*" (p. 440, *Book of Praise*). The king, however, was not persuaded, and Doornik felt the wrath of the authorities by way of persecution. DeBres was again forced to flee and live as a 'wanderer' for five years.

RETURN TO THE NETHERLANDS (VALENCIENNES): 1566; A MARTYR'S DEATH: 1566-1567

In 1566 deBres was called to the town of Valenciennes. Support for the Reformation continued to grow, and the people grew bold, meeting in the fields in crowds numbering 4000 - 12000 to hear deBres preach. The people came armed with their pitchforks in fear of the Roman Catholic authorities, who after a year, in March, 1567, captured the town and imprisoned many Protestants. DeBres managed to escape, but during a pause at a hotel was recognised, betrayed and arrested. He was taken back to Doornik, imprisoned, and two and a half months later, on 31st May 1567, was hung on the gallows.

CONFESSION OF FAITH IN THE FACE OF PERSECUTION

One might well question the purpose of knowing all this. DeBres was the man who wrote the Belgic Confession, and introduced his confession with those words of Article 1: "We all believe with the heart and confess with the mouth...." So many of the following articles repeat this same statement, be it with the abbreviated form "we believe". Such a statement ("we all believe") gains colour and perspective when we realise that deBres, together with his persecuted congregation, made the statement in a time when

doing so could mean one's death! They stated their faith in an environment of radical hostility, in an environment in which both the Roman Catholic Church and the government hated anything, and anyone, Protestant. Again, they did so in the full awareness that the Roman Catholic Church was sanctioned by the government to have at their disposal the horrid tool of the Inquisition, namely, authorities specialised in torturing in order to force people to recant the Protestant faith and return to Roman Catholicism. Such persecution was far from easy to withstand, embracing methods of torture worse than burning at the stake. Yet in that environment, deBres and the people said, "We believe." The riches of God's redeeming work of grace in Jesus Christ was to them well worth the price of persecution, imprisonment, even death! More: **all** the articles of the Confession were for deBres and his congregation of such importance and value that they were unwilling to deny or alter any for the sake of freedom and peace. They knew: *if God revealed it, it was worth more than life itself.*

That the faith deBres confessed in this Confession sustained him in the face of persecution is apparent from a letter deBres wrote to his wife during his imprisonment, dated 12th April 1567. This letter reads (in part) as follows:

"My very dear Catherine Ramon, my precious and most loved wife and sister in our Lord Jesus Christ... You know well enough that when you married me, you married a mortal man whose life was not sure for a single minute. Yet it has pleased our good God to give us about seven years together, and five children. If the Lord had wanted us to live together longer, He has the means to make it happen. But it is not His pleasure; so, His will be done and that be sufficient to you.

Remember too, that it was not by chance that I fell into the hands of my enemies, but through the providence of my God.... My God, You have let me be born at a time and hour determined by You, and through all the time of my life You have preserved and protected me in the face of unimaginable dangers, and You have fully delivered. And now, if that the hour has come in which I must leave this life in order to go to You, Your will be done...

Especially forget not the honour which God has shown to you by having given you a man who was not only a minister of the Son of God, but also a man so esteemed and privileged by God that He honoured him with the crown of martyrdom. I am joyful and my heart rejoices. I lack nothing in all my troubles. I am filled with the over-flowing riches of my God.... I had never thought that God would be so merciful to a poor creature as I am...

Adieu, Catherine, my dear good friend..."

Reading such a letter can hardly leave one untouched. One asks oneself, 'how was it possible for deBres to speak like that, having been persecuted throughout his life, in gaol, fully aware of the fact that he is going to die for the faith, yet speaking of joy, and of not lacking anything in all his troubles!' What this is?? This is **FAITH!** By the grace of God this man knew more than biblical facts. He also knew the words of Scripture to be true for HIM! He knew himself forgiven of his sins through the blood of Jesus Christ, and therefore secure in the almighty hands of His heavenly Father. So he was content, despite his situation. He worked with the promises of Scripture in passages as Psalm 57, singing of God,

*"Beneath Thy mighty wings I'll seek protection
Until the storms pass by. To God I flee -
To God Most High who charts my life's direction."*

He **believed** that his God led his life the way it went, this God made no mistakes, worked all for good. So he could be content. His was the same faith as is pointed up in the examples of Hebrews 11:

"Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance [from their tortures], that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword..." (vss 35ff).

Here was faith in action, a faith that knows and trusts the promises of God in the midst of the real

struggles of this life.

DeBres, together with his congregation in Doornik, said together that they believed this God. They knew who God was: God had given His Son to pay for their sins, and now God loved them so much that they were safe in His hands. This God led deBres' path to that hotel which led to his arrest, and deBres could say that it was all okay! Even in the face of death, he could say he was happy and that he lacked nothing! THAT IS FAITH! These were real people, like each of us today. They knew the Bible and the God of the Bible, and worked with His promises, acted accordingly. They accepted what God said and did it; they went where God led: quietly and peacefully. That is the context in which we read Article 1. In his difficult circumstances deBres confessed his faith in the God who is *"eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite, almighty, perfectly wise, just, good, and the overflowing fountain of all good."*

EVIDENCE OF FAITH

To us it seems too much. Confess that the almighty God who let deBres live in a time of persecution, who let His children be hounded, chased, arrested, burned is "just and good"?? Confess that such a God is the "overflowing fountain of all good"?? It doesn't sit well with our sinful minds. But *this is faith!* This is the material deBres found in the Bible and so he confessed it and said 'this is the way it is. I cannot understand God and I cannot understand why He does what He does, but this is my God, my Saviour! So I accept it, I'm content.' He could confess in Article 13:

We believe that this good God, after He had created all things, did not abandon them or give them up to fortune or chance, but that according to His holy will He so rules and governs them that in this world nothing happens without His direction."

In the face of the persecution that characterised his life, he could confess Article 28:

"We believe, since this holy assembly and congregation is the assembly of the redeemed and there is no salvation outside of it, that no one ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself, no matter what his state or quality may be. But all and everyone are obliged to join it and unite with it.... They should do so even though the rulers and edicts of princes were against it, and death or physical punishment might follow."

In the face of all that persecution, how tempting it would be for deBres and the other Protestants to stick with the faith of the Bible and meanwhile go through the motions of being Roman Catholic. But deBres and those with him knew that this was not the will of God. So they acted in accordance with the will of God revealed in Scripture, despite the possible cost to their lives. This is faith in action.

So too is the confession of Article 36: *"We believe that, because of the depravity of mankind, our gracious God has ordained kings, princes, and civil officers."* What a statement, given that the king of his day was the tyrant Phillip II of Spain, and his regent was the vengeful Margaret, who persecuted the Church so cruelly in Belgium. Even under the rule of such kings, deBres confessed what he read in Scripture: *"our gracious God has ordained kings, princes, and civil officers."* So he could add too, despite the difficulties of obedience in the grind of real life, that *"everyone -no matter of what quality, condition, or rank- ought to be subject to the civil officers..."* and that included King Philip II. Truly, this is a confession borne in the grind of **real life!** This man lived as real a life as each one of us, and in his particular circumstances he believed what God said, "In Jesus Christ, you, Guido, are my child, and so I love you and care for you." If God says so, that is how it is! So deBres could be at peace. That is faith.

FAITH: EVIDENT THROUGH WORD AND DEED

We live 435 years after deBres wrote this confession. We have all made profession of our faith, and so stated in the presence of God and His congregation that, "Yes, I love the Lord, I want to serve the Lord, I believe His Word." We made that good profession years after deBres died, and in circumstances different from his. Yet the faith we profess is the same as his; his Belgic Confession is our confession, the faith he confessed is the faith we confess. That's possible because the God we confess is the same God deBres

confessed, and this God hasn't changed. The God of Hebrews 11 is the God of Guido deBres in 1561, and is My God in 1996. This God does not change, His Word does not change, His promises do not change. Therefore I am safe in the hands of this God, as safe in His hands as were the saints of Hebrews 11 and the saints of 1561. Together we all confess one faith. Just as God held on then and was trustworthy then, so He is trustworthy today. And I **believe** it. It is not just an academic knowledge. No, it affects the way I live. It is a knowledge and a confidence, accepting what God says *and* knowing myself safe in His hands despite the circumstances. This faith is not idle, nor is it pushed into the 'corner of one's heart.' Rather, this is a **faith** that **determines what one does and says**.

Article 1 speaks of confessing with the mouth: it comes **out** of the mouth in words, and it is expressed through deeds. In deBres' case, he left behind a wife and five children, and yet he could say that he was happy. For faith, reliance on God, gives a peace which enables one to be content in any circumstance (cf Philippians 4:11). Such a faith cannot be hidden. As the apostle James writes:

"What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,' but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead" (James 2:14-17).

No, faith cannot remain hidden. In the example of James 2 faith becomes evident in the way one shows care for the needy. In the days of deBres faith became apparent in being content in the face of leaving a wife and children without a husband and father. Faith comes out in our circumstances too, in being content with what Father gives us. Faith comes out in what we say: "God, is this Your command for me? I ask no questions but I do it." Faith is a life of obedience, it is shown by a life of obedience.

GOD GIVES FAITH AND THE STRENGTH TO LIVE BY FAITH

Possible reactions to all this on our part might be: "If this is what faith is all about, I surely haven't got faith! How was it possible for deBres to do and say all he did? How was it possible for the saints of Hebrews 11 to persist? I would never be able to do so!"

It was God who gave to deBres what it took to be steadfast. God does not change. God gives to us also what it takes to be steadfast. If life's circumstances close in on us, God will give the strength. 1 Corinthians 10:13:

"No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it."

Since this is the case, I accept and believe that if in the future I should find myself in the position deBres was in, God will hold on to me. God has said so! Therefore today I need not worry about what will happen tomorrow. **THAT IS FAITH:** I accept what God says. Admittedly, that is far from easy. We all know so well what a battle that is. To use the words of Lord's Day 44, *"even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience."* Nevertheless, it is a **beginning**: a beginning worked by God.

Should I despair then if my faith is nothing in comparison to the faith of deBres? Should I conclude that I am not a real Christian after all? Should I be envious of deBres because in the struggles of my life I battle way too much? No! I believe that God holds on. Yes, I stumble, I have my shortcomings. Nevertheless I am confident that the God Who claimed me as His will always hold on to me, and so I am safe in His hands. This, after all, is the promise of His Word.

DOCTRINE OF GOD

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF GOD

In the first article of his confession, deBres made mention of several characteristics of God, as he found them revealed in holy Scripture. In what follows, I intend to discuss various of these characteristics, and add a couple deBres did not mention in Article 1. As we seek to understand God's revelation concerning Himself, we do well to remember that this God is *our* God. To study God's characteristics is no mere academic pursuit, but a study which is of personal concern to each of us. It is a study which concerns itself with where I am at today in my particular circumstances. That is: it is *God* who has placed me where I am in life today. GOD: UNCHANGING, IMMUTABLE

God does not change. We find evidence of this in Scripture:

Numbers 23:19

"God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?"

This is God: One who does not change His mind at random. What He says He'll do, He **does** do.

1 Samuel 15: 28

Said Samuel to Saul after Saul's disobedience in the battle against the Amalekites,

*"the Strength of Israel will not lie nor relent. For **He is not a man, that He should relent.**"*

The Strength of Israel, God, does not change as people do. His mood **does not** 'alter with the weather.'

Psalms 102:25-27

*"Of old You laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. They will perish, but You will endure; Yes, they will all grow old like a garment; like a cloak You will change them, and they will be changed. **But You are the same, and Your years will have no end.**"*

Here the Psalmist compares God to creation. Despite the fact that all things around him change and age, he confesses that God Himself does not change. God stays the same.

James 1:17

*"Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, **with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.**"*

Scripture speaks of God as being constant and consistent.

In presenting our God as unchanging, Scripture does not wish to us to conclude that God is therefore cold and unemotional. God indeed does interact with our circumstances. Yet our changing circumstances do not come as surprises to Him so that He changes His mind regarding how to deal with us in our new situations. He is reliable, trustworthy. One can count on Him. What He was yesterday He is today and He will be tomorrow. What God said He would do yesterday He did, what He says He'll do today He does, and what He says He'll do tomorrow He will do. Scripture itself states that God is not unemotional for it reveals to us that God can be sorry.

Genesis 6:5-7

Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the

thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And **the Lord was sorry** that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. So the Lord said, "I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, **for I am sorry that I have made them.**"

Exodus 32:10-14

After Israel had made and worshipped the golden calf, we read of a dialogue between God and Moses:

*"Let Me alone, that My wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them. And I will make of you a great nation." Then Moses pleaded with the Lord his God ... "Turn from Your fierce wrath, and relent from this harm to Your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore by Your own self, and said to them: I will multiply your descendants ..." **So the Lord relented from the harm which He said He would do to His people.**"*

God can be sorry, but His being sorry, and consequently His act of changing His plan, does not mean He is changing, whimsical. God is the God of the Covenant. In the context of His covenant God said He would either bless or curse. God's act of blessing or cursing is dependent upon His people's behaviour. This is not the equivalent of God changing His mind. The point is that He made His covenant, and when His people broke the covenant God did what He said He would do when they would break the covenant, namely, He cursed them. God always works within the confines of the covenant, and remains unchangingly faithful to what He has promised and planned in the covenant.

So who is my God? My God is One who does not change. 'So, what difference does that make to me?' one could ask. 'God was the God of Abraham and Jacob so many years ago. I live today, and wish to know therefore who my God is **today**' This is a gulf we create for ourselves and it is a gulf we can only bridge by reckoning with the reality of God's immutability. Says Packer,

*"The link between them and us ... is God Himself. For the God with whom they had to do is the same God with whom we have to do. ... It appears that the truth on which we must dwell in order to dispel this feeling that there is an unbridgeable gulf between the position of men in Bible times and our own, is the truth of God's **immutability.**"*

Hence, if my God doesn't change, it means that my God was also Abraham's God and David's God. The characteristics of God as revealed in His dealings with David are equally the characteristics true of my God today. Therefore I can discover what kind of a God I have by studying how God dealt with David. For example, read Psalm 3: a prayer of David when he fled from his son Absalom whose plan it was to dethrone David. "Lord, how they have increased who trouble me! Many are they who rise up against me. Many are they who say of me, "There is no help for him in God." (vs 1,2). But what was it that David could say of God all of three thousand years ago? This, "But You, O Lord, are a shield for me, my glory and the One who lifts up my head. I cried to the Lord with my voice, and He heard me from His holy hill." (vs 3,4). How does what I read here in this Psalm touch me today? Is it even relevant to me today? Yes, very much so. I can read this Psalm in the context of my situation too, for the God addressed in this Psalm is **my** God. My circumstances might differ greatly from David's, but they are none the less real. It was Satan who was behind Absalom, and it is none other than Satan who tackles me too. With reference to my three sworn enemies, the devil, the world and my own flesh I too can say "how they have increased who trouble me." To think this way is to make Psalm 3 alive, to understand what the Lord my God says to me today in this psalm.

Not only does God tell me who He is, but also who He is **in my circumstances**. My God is the God of long ago. He is the same God Daniel relied on when he was dropped into the den of lions. No, God may deal differently with me than He did with Daniel. It is possible that I may never be confronted with a den of lions in the course of my life. Although the way in which God deals with me is different from the way in which He dealt with Daniel, this is the same, that He has dealt with Daniel, and will deal with me, **in the way He sees fit**. To know God as unchanging brings comfort, says Packer:

"Where is the sense of distance and difference, then, between believers in Bible times and ourselves? It is excluded. On what grounds? On the grounds that God does not change. Fellowship with Him, trust in His word, living by faith, 'standing on the promises of God', are essentially the same realities for us today as they were for Old and New Testament believers. This thought brings comfort as we enter into the perplexities of each day: amid all the changes and uncertainties of life in a nuclear age, God and His Christ remain the same - almighty to save."

Therefore no matter what is happening, and what may yet happen in the world around us, all that is important is that **God does not change**. Just as Daniel trusted in God when he faced the lions, so we are called to respond to this knowledge of God with trust in Him. Nowhere does the Bible speak of any anguish on Daniel's part. Daniel knew himself at peace. Should we be any different? Should we be restless if things go different than we would wish? No, says Packer, we should trust in the same manner as Old and New Testament believers were allowed to trust, for the God in whom both they of long ago and we today trust has not changed and does not change.

"If our God is the same as the God of New Testament believers, how can we justify ourselves in resting content with an experience of communion with Him, and a level of Christian conduct, that falls so far below theirs?"

GOD is Almighty

Article 1 of the Belgic Confession uses the word 'almighty' to describe God's greatness. The Bible very much portrays God as almighty; the Old Testament repeats the phrase 'Lord of hosts' some 280 times. 'Hosts' is here a reference to angels, spirits of the air. God is therefore portrayed as the commander of thousands, commander of a myriad of angels. The New Testament also speaks of God's greatness, but it does so in New Testament language. In Revelation 1:8 the word 'Almighty' is used, which is the equivalent for the Old Testament phrase 'Lord of hosts.'

As a consequence of being almighty, God can do whatever He intends to do. With reference to the fact that God would enable Sarah, a woman of ninety years of age, to bear a child, one reads in Genesis 18:14,

"Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son."

This is indeed an incredible deed of the Lord. Yes, incredible to the mind of man, but not so for the Lord, for He is almighty. Nothing is too hard or impossible for Him. God can do whatever He pleases. Whatever He says He will do He **can** do. In his book, Packer describes God as He presents Himself to us in the book of Genesis. He was the God who spoke at creation and at His command a world was there, where previously there was none. After the fall into sin, God spoke, and a curse fell upon the earth. God spoke and the waters of the earth rose and rain fell so that the earth was flooded and destroyed by water. God spoke and Sarah, in her nineties, had a child.

Who is **my** God? He is no weakling. He is not restricted in any way. Why not? Because He is majestic, almighty. In Isaiah 40 we read of the Israelites in exile protesting their circumstances. *"My way is hidden from the Lord, and my just claim is passed over by my God,"* was Israel's complaint. How was Isaiah, God's prophet, to respond to this complaint? He had to tell Israel **who God is**. Who is He? He is the only one who can answer the questions of Isaiah 40:12 in the affirmative. There one reads, *"Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, measured heaven with a span and calculated the dust of the earth in a measure? Weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance?"* Yes, we have all seen the ocean and know its depths. Measure the oceans in the hollow of my hand? There is no way I can do it, but God can. Measure heaven with a span, that vast heaven in which the stars are separated by so many light years? Calculate earth's endless dust? Weigh Bluff Knoll?! Mt Everest?! We have to admit it is beyond us to do any of these things, yet God can do them all. This is indeed humbling.

Our God is so great that to Him, *"the nations are as a drop in a bucket ... all nations before Him are as nothing, and they are counted by Him less than nothing and worthless.... He brings the princes to*

nothing; He makes the judges of the earth useless" (Isaiah 40:15, 17, 23). God is not overawed by large nations. They are as insignificant in God's eyes as a drop remaining in a bucket after we've washed the car. God regards even the largest nation as less than nothing! And as far as Sennacherib was concerned, the cruel ruler at the time, to God he too is nothing, useless. So as far as we're concerned today, who needs to live in fear of that large nation of China, or rulers such as Saddam Hussein? In God's eyes today's rulers too are as insignificant as a tiny drop in a bucket.

And as far as Israel, or we ourselves, or the inhabitants of the earth are concerned, how does God regard them? Isaiah 40:22 tells us that the earth's inhabitants *"are like grasshoppers."* That's all! Grasshoppers: those small, numerous insects we don't worry about as we walk through a paddock. Who are we in God's eyes? We are like so many grasshoppers, all chirping and hopping about. And who is God? He is the Almighty One who can measure the vastness of the earth and the heavens! And it is against this almighty God that Israel complains that He has forgotten them?? "Get real!" says Isaiah to Israel. And it is against this God that we complain?! Yet this God has not changed since the days of Isaiah. This is **my** God. Whatever He wants to do in my life He can do and does do.

This almighty God, however, does not use His power in a rash, abusive way. He is my God and my **Father**. Each Sunday we confess the faith from which we draw strength for our lives, as summarised in the Apostles' Creed. Then we also confess *"I believe in God the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth."* Lord's Day 9 elaborates on what it means to confess this. First of all, it means that I believe *"that the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ... is, for the sake of Christ His Son, my God and my Father."* Secondly, it means that I confess that *"in Him I trust so completely as to have no doubt that He will provide me with all things necessary for body and soul, and will also turn to my good whatever adversity He sends me in this life of sorrow. He is able to do so as almighty God, and willing also as a faithful Father."*

Do I ascribe whatever happens in my life to chance? Are my circumstances today the result of Satan having got the better of me? No! My Father in Jesus Christ is almighty. Not even a hair falls from my head unless God permits it (Lord's Day 1). Therefore Satan cannot touch me or my children unless God permits him to. God is behind whatever happens to me, and He promises to turn it to my benefit. God has said that He will do that, and He does it too. So what does it mean to me, what difference does it make, that I know my God to be the almighty? It means this: I may know myself safe in His hands each and every day of my life, and nothing happens to me unless my God permits it. Even the smallest, seemingly insignificant incidents in my life are guided by Him.

"Our thoughts of God are not great enough; we fail to reckon with the reality of His limitless wisdom and power." To reckon with God's limitless wisdom and power, to confess that God is almighty, is to acknowledge that I am where I am in life because God put me there, be it happily married, unemployed, struggling with sickness, etc.

THE WISDOM OF GOD

Scripture teaches us that our God is perfectly wise.

Romans 16:27

*"to God, **alone wise**, be glory through Jesus Christ forever. Amen."*

Ps 104:24

Not only is God wise, but also the way in which He works is wise. With reference to His work of creation, we read here, *"O Lord, how manifold are Your works! **In wisdom** You have made them all."*

These words refer specifically to God's act of creation. But not only does the Psalm praise the beauty and majesty of God's creation. It also acknowledges God's wisdom in the way His creation functions. For example, the cycles of the seasons, the divisions between day and night, the instincts and habits of the

animals when it comes to having young and caring for them, obtaining food, finding shelter all in turn display the wisdom of God.

In the Bible, God's wisdom means that God knows the goal and how to attain it. *"Wisdom is the power to see, and the inclination to choose, the best and highest goal, together with the surest means of attaining it."* God knows where I am now and He knows what is the right goal for me. He knows the right way to get me to the goal He has in mind for me. Take Abraham as an example. God led his life in such a way that the outcome would be that Abraham **grew in God**. God had a particular goal in mind for Abraham, and so led Abraham's life down a particular route so that so many years later Abraham had grown. This route was not as straight forward as Abraham would have wished, but it was the way God in wisdom determined in order for Abraham to attain the goal God had in mind for him. Packer describes some of Abraham's experiences and lessons on this route, and does the same for Jacob and Joseph in order to illustrate how the way God directs the lives of His children is full of wisdom.

What about God's wisdom in relation to my life? In order to appreciate the wisdom of God's dealings in our lives we need to analyse these events in the context of Hebrews 12. There we read of the Hebrews struggling and suffering (though the details of their sufferings are not known to us). They had their own ideas (we may surmise) as to how they were to get to their goal, and (not surprisingly) will have preferred a straight path

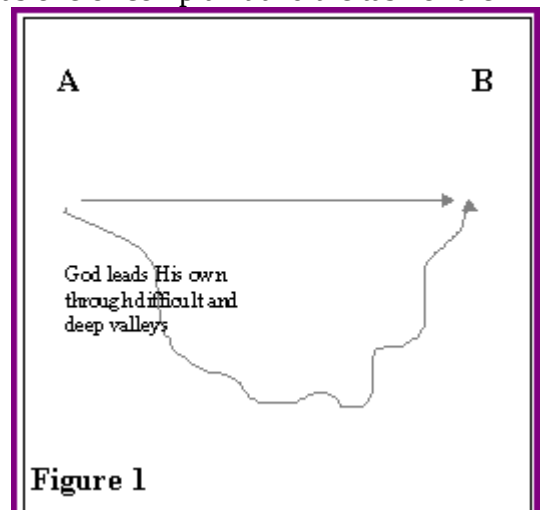
from A to B (see Figure 1). But God said no, for this did not coincide with His plan for the Hebrews. In His wisdom, God determined that the Hebrews were to travel through some very difficult valleys, so that they might in turn grow in God. The Hebrews' reaction to this was one of complaint and the task of the author of the letter to the Hebrews was to encourage them. How then were they encouraged?

The Hebrews were urged (vs 5f) to remember the exhortation with which Solomon, as father, exhorted his children in Proverbs 3:11,12. What was this exhortation? *"My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives."* The author of the letter to the Hebrews then explains this exhortation in the verses 7 to 11. God deals with them as a Father, he writes. As a father is motivated by love for his children when he disciplines them, so God in love disciplines, moulds, directs His children on the paths of life He has marked out for them. Verse 10: God

chastens us "for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness." It is true that *"No chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful..."* But just as God was busy in the lives of Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Daniel and so many other of His children in Scripture, so He is busy in my life, in **His** own way. It is God's wisdom which has resulted in Him leading them down a different track than the one they preferred, and God remains equally wise today in leading us down different tracks than we prefer.

So what am I to do? Packer speaks of Christian wisdom, which is **accepting** that God is wise. Wisdom on the part of the Christian, he says, is *"not a sharing in all His knowledge, but a disposition to confess that He is wise, and to cleave to Him and live for Him in the light of His word through thick and thin."* God would have me respond to the confession that He is wise by saying words as these: 'God, if You in Your wisdom determine that this is the path I'm to follow in life in order for me to become what You want me to become, then I confess my circumstances (though so painful and unsettling to me) are OK.' This is what it means to confess the wisdom of God Almighty who never makes a mistake. No, to confess it in the difficulties of life is not easy. It is a daily struggle to be at peace with this confession, but God's identity as God of wisdom means that I may know myself safe, loved, and cared for, despite my circumstances.

With respect to obeying the first commandment, in Lord's Day 34, Q & A 94, it is pointed out that I am required to *"rightly come to know the only true God, trust in Him alone, submit to Him with all humility*



and patience, expect all good from Him only, and love, fear and honour Him with all my heart." Who is this only true God I must come to know well? He is the unchanging, almighty, and wise God. The first commandment requires of me that I come to know God well in His 'immutability', 'majesty', 'wisdom'. As a consequence of knowing Him well, I trust in Him alone and submit to Him wherever He leads me. To submit to Him means to accept the way He wants to go with me. To confess that He is wise is to say that His way is good. It means to accept with humility and patience the way this God goes with me even when He takes me down a difficult road. To be dissatisfied with God's way in my life amounts to sin against the first commandment.

This is where the Christian can struggle so much, and is consequently the source of so many pastoral problems. The struggle is the inability to accept the way God leads one's life. For example, God's track for some of His children may confront them with abuse in their childhood years. It is for God's child to say 'it is God who led me down this particular path, including my abuse, in order to get me from where I was to where I must be.' In no circumstances of life is it fitting for God's child to be angry or bitter on account of what has happened. To be angry or bitter is to object to the way God has led me. Yet if God is unchanging, almighty, wise (as He says He is), then it is for me to accept His revelation about Himself, and therefore also accept with humility and patience what He has given in years gone by. This accepting is a daily struggle, especially where hurt and disappointment run deep. And in this life we have only a "small beginning" of the ability to accept what God gives (LD 44). Nevertheless, with all God's children there is that small beginning, and therein lies evidence that the unchanging, almighty and wise God of the Bible works in my heart and life, for my growth and benefit

THE TRUTH OF GOD

To say of God that He is "true" means that there is no deceit in Him. God is fully reliable in all He does and in all He says. The following texts from Scripture give evidence of this:

Psalm 31:5

*"Into Your hand I commit my spirit; You have redeemed me, **O LORD God of truth.**"*

In the verses 9-13 of this psalm David expresses that he is in trouble, sought after by his enemies. Yet, in spite of these very real and difficult circumstances, David knows that he is secure with God because His God is true, reliable, and He is who He says He is. David is able to commit his spirit into the hand of his God because his God is a God of truth, and hence trustworthy. These words of David were quoted by Jesus on the cross after God had poured out on Him the full measure of His wrath and totally rejected Him. Jesus, like David, could count on His Father and therefore he could say, *"Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit"* (Luke 23:46)

Exodus 34:6

*"And the Lord passed before him and proclaimed, **"The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth."***

While Moses was with God on Mount Sinai, Israel had sinned by making and serving the golden calf. Though deserving of God's rejection, God did not annul the covenant He had made with Israel, but kept that covenant. Despite Israel's sin which made them deserving of death, Israel again received life in God. As a God of truth, God is true to His Word of covenant with Israel.

John 17:3,17

*"And this is eternal life, that they may know **You, the only true God ... Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.**"*

God is characterised by truth. He is faithful, reliable, void of any deceit.

Romans 3:4

*"... Indeed, **let God be true, but every man a liar.**"*

The truth of God stands in stark contrast to man's deceit. People lack truthfulness but this can never be said of God. God is true and His Word is true. I may have my own perceptions of what is real and what is true, but I cannot rely on these perceptions. Only God's Word, free of any mistakes and deception, is the reliable measure of reality.

This means in turn that, where my perceptions, experiences or conclusions differ from God's Word, I must conclude that the error lies with myself. That is not surprising, since I am sinful, and hence my powers of reasoning are also affected by sin.

For example, the science of geology may have its method of dating rocks, and on the basis of such data it tries to determine the age of different places in the world. Though the accuracy of such calculations need not be the point of dispute, it are geologists' conclusions based on these calculations that are to be disputed because by them the fact of God's creating the world is denied. Despite what any evidence to the contrary might say, **God** said that He created the world. Though we might **think** our conclusions (based on the science of geology) are correct, those conclusions must take second place to God's unerring Word: He said he made the world not that long ago, and so that's the way it is.

Likewise, we may adopt for ourselves solutions to problems or situations in our lives. However, if these solutions do not comply with the course of action God says we are to follow in our lives, then we go wrong. Our solution to a broken marriage might well be to opt out. But if God says No to such a course of action, then we must heed His No. If I confess that God is true, the consequence is that I am to do and accept whatever He says. I cannot separate my confession concerning the truth of God from obedience to His Word.

Concerning the inseparability between truth and God, Packer has this to say,

"Truth in the Bible is a quality of persons primarily ... the quality of a person who is entirely self-consistent, sincere, realistic, and undeceived. God is such a person: truth in this sense, is His nature, and He has not got it in Him to be anything else. That is why He cannot lie ... That is why His words to us are true and cannot be other than true. They are the index of reality: they show us things as they really are, and as they will be for us in the future according to whether we heed God's words to us or not."

My perception of the way things are may be totally different from how things really are. But my perception of the way things are does not matter. What does matter is whether I accept what **God** says. God has said that if I obey Him He will bless me. I don't need any proof of this. I obey, simply because God said I must, and I know this God to be truthful, reliable; that is sufficient. Therefore I can be content and at peace.

In this context, Packer draws attention to prayer.

"Christians deprive themselves of their most solid comforts by their unbelief and forgetfulness of God's promises. For there is no extremity so great, but here are promises suitable to it, and abundantly sufficient for our relief in it."

A thorough acquaintance with the promises would be of the greatest advantage in prayer. With what comfort may the Christian address himself to God in Christ when he considers the repeated assurances that his prayers shall be heard!"

God has said that He will give what He has promised. On that basis I will ask all that He has commanded me to ask for. I may pray for those promises, and also believe I will receive them. Why can I believe this? Because God has said so. So often we pray, but our prayer go unanswered. Why aren't they answered? Because we pray for what it is we would like to have. I am not to pray for a luxurious house, because God

hasn't promised to give it. I am rather to pray for daily bread, because this is something God has promised to give. So it is important for God's children to know their Bible, for it speaks of what God promised to give to His children. Knowing from the Bible what God promises to give, His children may then also pray boldly for these things, confident that they will receive; for God's promises are always true

THE LOVE OF GOD

Our understanding of God's love must not be dictated by what we understand or experience love to be. God is not comparable to us, for God is God and we are sinners. We are incapable of ever loving in such a way that we are able to say, 'such is the love of God.' God's love simply cannot be compared to the love of a person. God loved even before He created people. Already before the beginning of the world, love was present in the Trinity: God loved the Son and the Spirit. God didn't need people in order to focus or express His love.

As it is, it pleased God to create people, finite beings, and it pleased God to love them *freely*. We didn't woo God to love us; no, He gave his love freely, apart from our asking. His love was undeserved. Mankind fell into sin. And yes, God even loves sinners; not all of them, but *some* of them. Those whom God does love are not more deserving of God's love because they are better than others. Yet God loves them, loves *them* specifically because He wants to. It is God's *good pleasure* that He loves them. This was total 'self-giving' on God's part: He loved us by giving Himself. God expressed this self-giving most specifically when He gave up His only Son.

Scripture has the following to say concerning God's love:

1 John 4:7,8

"Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love."

In these two verses God is presented as a God of love.

Hosea 14:4

*"I will heal their backsliding, I will love them **freely**."*

Israel has sinned and persisted in sin to such an extent that they deserved their exile. Yet God said that He would heal them, not because they deserved this, but because of God's love is **freely** given.

Deuteronomy 7:6 - 8

*"For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; **the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure** above all the peoples on the face of the earth. The LORD did not set his love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but **because the Lord loves you ...** "*

It was not due to any merit on Israel's part that God loved them. He simply loved them because it was his good pleasure to do so.

Romans 5:8

*"But **God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**"*

When did God love us? While we were sinners: unattractive! Now read how much He gave us:

1 John 4:9, 10

*"In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that **God has sent His only begotten Son into the world**, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that **He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.**"*

God loved us so much that He gave EVERYTHING He had to give: His only Son. It wasn't because we loved God, but because **God loved** us: His love was an act of giving, self-emptying. Read what the result of this was:

1 John 3:1

*"Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, **that we should be called children of God!**"*

We, sinners, are allowed to be children of God! Can you imagine greater, more glorious evidence of His love?! His love and His grace are freely given to sinners, so that we are made His children!

If that is love, that God has sought *me* out and gave up His Son for my sake, this must *motivate* me to *respond* with *gratitude*. Gratitude for the fact that God reached out into *my* life and poured out His grace and love on *me*. Here lies the surprise of the Gospel, that God sought out such miserable wretches as we are; more, this is the surprise of the Gospel that God sought *me* out. This is a reality so exciting that the child of God cannot but be stirred to show and express thankfulness and praise to God.

This is the God who sought me out and also leads my life. What does He allow to happen in my life? In whatever God gives, He remains a God of love, and so all He gives is expression of His love. God has reached out to each one of us, made His covenant with each of us, extended His love to each of us. To each of us when we were baptised God said, "I am your God, your Father in Jesus Christ. I will bless you and keep you. I will avert all evil or turn it to your benefit. For Christ's sake I will forgive all your sins, and pour out My Holy Spirit into your heart." On the road of life travelled by each of us since our baptism we have come across both good and bad things. Of the good things it is very easy for us to say that they are expressions of God's love towards us. But the same must be said of the less pleasant things we face in life. These things too are expressions of God's love, for they testify of the fact that God is busy in our lives. Says Packer, *all* experiences in a Christian's life are given by God for the Christian's wellbeing.

*"As a believer, (the Christian) finds in the cross of Christ assurance that he, as an individual, is beloved of God; the Son of God ... loved **me**, and gave himself for **me** (Galatians 2:20). Knowing this, he is able to apply to himself the promise that all things work together for good to them that love God and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28). Not just **some** things, not but **all** things!"*

If God is indeed the God of truth Scripture presents Him to be, then every word He has spoken is true - including a word as Romans 8:28. Granted, experience tells me that certain things are *not* good for me. But it is not for *me* to judge a situation by what **I** think, for I am a sinner. If God says that **all** things are for my good, that all events come complete with God's love, then it is for me to accept this statement from God. Not to do so is to challenge God's truthfulness. Concerning the good *and* the bad that the Christian may experience in life, Packer goes on to say,

"Every single thing that happens to him expresses God's love to him, and comes to him for the furthering of God's purpose for him. Thus, so far as he is concerned, God is love to him -holy, omnipotent love- at every moment and in every event of every day's life. Even when he cannot see the why and the wherefore of God's dealings, he knows that there is love in and behind them, and so he can rejoice always, even when, humanly speaking, things are going wrong..."

Hebrews 12:4-11 speaks of God disciplining His children, and describes this discipline as an act of love of the Father towards the child. It is true: no child likes his father's discipline at the time he receives it, but later in life will acknowledge it to have been an expression of his father's love. It is **because** God loves us that He disciplines us. He does so for our benefit, so that *"afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it."*

This love of which the Bible speaks is holy love, it hates sin. God's love is such that He wishes to mould us to die more and more to sin, and live more and more to God. God is busy in His wisdom, but in His wisdom it is always His love that makes us grow in Him.

In Psalm 32 we read that David needed to confess sin, but did not want to (verse 3, *"When I kept silent"*). So what did God do? God reached into David's life with trouble - and David did not enjoy it! *"My bones grew old through my groaning all day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was turned into the drought of summer."* Yet, David could say "blessed, happy, is the man who is forgiven" (vs 1). How was it possible for David to come to that point? It was because God reached out into David's life. What could this be, other than God's love?! This was love, that God was busy in David's life, moulding him, until David confessed his sin.

If God is God, all He does in the life of His child is love, even though His child does not see or experience it that way. If it were not so, how else is one to read Hebrews 12 or 1 John 4:17,18? Perfect love casts our fear. God loves and therefore there is no need for me to fear. Things may happen in my life which I don't like, but God says to each of His children, "I love you, relax, and be content, I take you by the hand and lead you." We cannot understand that adversity in our lives are expressions of God's love. This is where faith is required, not human reasoning.

On the basis of what God has done for us, namely, sent His Son to die for our sins (1 John 4:10), He also gives us a command *"to love one another"* (1 John 4:11). See also verses 20, 21. Love involves self-denial. Within the communion of saints it is my duty to deny myself for the sake of the other. This is equally true in marriage and any other inter-personal relation. It is not a case of what I can get out of the relationship, but rather what I am able to be for and to give to the other: self-denial. 1 John 4:10 reads, *"In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His son to be the propitiation for our sins."*

God loved us and sent His son: He **gave**. GIVING is essential to loving, and so, in marriage and in communion of saints (or in any other relation involving love), it is not for me to want to receive first of all but rather to **give**. It is for me to be the first to give, it's not for me to wait for the other to give - even as God did not wait for us, but instead reached out to the unworthy with His love. If we are serious in believing that God is love, then we must work at this element of love too, for it is for us to reflect what God is like.

GOD IS GOOD

Of no one else but God can it be said that he is good. This characteristic is unique to God. Said Jesus to the Pharisee who addressed Him as "Good Teacher" *"Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is God"* (Mark 10:18). God **is** good, and **all His works are good**. Both God's goodness and the goodness of God's works are confessed by David in Psalm 119. *"You are good, and do good"* (verse 68). This confession of David was not just a general statement about God, but a firm conviction on David's part, confessed in his particular circumstances. In the verses 65-67 David writes, *"You have dealt well with Your servant, O LORD, according to Your word. Teach me good judgment and knowledge, for I believe Your commandments. Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word."* Then follows David's confession: *"You are good, and do good."* Here we read that David had strayed and consequently God afflicted him. What does David say about what God does, including the affliction God imposed on him? David says that God does good! No comment is made as to whether David liked the affliction he experienced. But by the grace of God, David was able to confess that what God does is good. Likewise what we experience in life might not always be experienced as good, yet it all **is** good.

What is it that Nahum says concerning God after he has described God's deeds in chapter 1:4-6? There we read, *"He rebukes the sea and makes it dry, and dries up all the rivers. Bashan and Carmel wither, and the flower of Lebanon wilts. The mountains quake before Him, the hills melt, and the earth heaves at His presence, yes, the world and all who dwell in it. Who can stand before His indignation? And who can endure the fierceness of His anger? His fury is poured out like fire, and the rocks are thrown down by Him."* With which words does Nahum then continue his prophecy? *"The LORD is good!"* (Nahum 1:7).

The words of the verses 4-6 incline one to say that this is a God one would rather not deal with. Yet Nahum goes on to say "*The LORD is good.*" This is what Nahum has to prophecy concerning who God is and what He has done. Moved by the Holy Spirit Nahum says that in all those deeds as described in the verses 4-6, the Lord is good. God's goodness is not determined by whether or not I think He is good. God is good and what He does is good. Whether I perceive it as good is a totally different matter. In fact, given my sinfulness, my evaluation of what God does is bound to be incorrect.

To whom does God do good? In Psalm 145:9 David writes, "*The LORD is good to all.*" All God's works, which are good, are for all people. God does not reserve His goodness for only a few good people or for a few righteous people. Jesus says the same in Matthew 5:44,45 where we read, "*But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.*" Granted, it does not say here that God is good to all but that we are to do good to all. Yet, as sons of God, we are to imitate our Father, that is, to be good as He is good. "*For He is kind to the unthankful and evil,*" Luke 6:35. God is kind, good to both the unthankful and the evil.

What are the consequences of believing God to be good?

Firstly, I am to confess that in everything God does, He does good. I am to confess this concerning what God does in my life, in both the big and the small events. I am to confess that my God is good and that therefore whatever He gives to me or does with me in my life is good. This is not a comment on what I see, for what I see is predominantly evil. Rather, it is a confession of faith: **I believe** that God's deeds in my life are good. I am also to confess this concerning what God does in the world around me, including the recent tragedy in Port Arthur. According to the standards of God's law and to the human mind, shooting thirty six people dead is so hideously evil. But God would have us say more than that. He would have us say too that the Lord is good in all He does. His hand was behind that event also. I am to confess that God is also busy in the events of Port Arthur. Therefore, horrible though this event may be, I am not to despair for God **is** in control. God does not work evil for the nation, but good. Despite the numerous questions I may still have I can confess this because it is a confession of faith.

Secondly, if God does good and if I am allowed to be a child of God, **I am to do good**. I am to imitate my God, not just in doing good, but in doing good to **all**, even to the unthankful and the evil. See the above quote from Matthew 5:44f. I should remember too that I was a sinner, evil to God, when God sought me out (Rom 5:8).

Thirdly, because God does good, I am to praise God without ceasing. In the words of Scripture: "*For the LORD is good*" (Ps 100:5) and "*Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good!*" (Ps 136:1) This refrain is found repeatedly throughout Scripture; see also Psalms 107.

God's goodness demands a response of faith, service and praise on my part. However, if I fail to appreciate God's goodness I can only expect a response of judgment from Him. In Romans 11 Israel is compared to a tree, the Israelites being branches of the tree of Abraham. Disbelieving Israelites, dead twigs and branches, are cut off by God, and in their place He grafts Gentiles. God's goodness and severity go hand in hand. Cutting off dead Israelite branches is a display of God's severity in response to unbelief and His grafting the Gentiles into this tree is a display of His goodness. "*Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness*" (Romans 11:17). If that goodness of God is not appreciated by the Romans, they will experience the severity of God, and be cut off from the tree into which God had earlier grafted them. Rejection of goodness leads to experiencing God's severity. This is a principle that applies to any situation in life. God causes His rain to fall on both the just and the unjust. The fact that God gives good to all does not mean that all will acknowledge God as good, and not to do so is to bring judgment upon oneself. It is a matter of faith: do I believe that what God does is good? If I don't believe this, the consequences are serious.

GOD IS ETERNAL

To confess that God is eternal means the following:

1) God has no beginning and no end.

"Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God" (Psalm 90:2).

"But You are the same, and Your years will have no end" (Psalm 102:27).

God has no end. The comfort in knowing this is that, no matter what happens, God will **always** be there; He does not perish.

2) God is above time.

All things around us change in time: days change over into night, hour passes into hour, the seasons change. Man is caught up in the web of time. But not so God. God doesn't follow the same sequence of day and night as man does. Says Moses in Psalm 90:4, *"For a thousand years in Your sight are like yesterday when it is past, and like a watch in the night."* Likewise, Peter in 2 Peter 3:8 says, *"... with the LORD one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day."* This is incomprehensible to man for he can only think in categories of time. However, God is above time; time is but a creature created by God. God's eternity is an eternal now. For God there is no yesterday or tomorrow.

3) God controls time.

Because God created time He is also in control of time. In Genesis 1:14 we read of God dividing the day from the night. However, God's control over time is not just restricted to a control over the hours of the day and the seasons of the year, but also extends over all things that happen in time. **All** events are in God's control. Although man is subject to time, God is not. Time is a creature at God's disposal. In whatever God permits to happen in this world I meet God, and consequently any response of mine to what takes place in my life is ultimately a response to what God does. My decisions, my responses, whatever I say about God now has a bearing for eternity. This knowledge makes life all the more awesome.

GOD IS ONE

In Deuteronomy 6:4 we read, *"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one!"* There are two equally legitimate ways of understanding this text:

1) The Lord alone is God.

There are not two Gods or three Gods but only ONE God. In Deuteronomy 4:39 it says *"... the LORD Himself is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; **there is no other.**"* There is no competition between God and another god. There simply is no second God. This is confirmed by what we read in the following texts:

Deuteronomy 32:39 *"... I, even I am He, and **there is no God besides Me.**"* God only is God.

Isaiah 44:6 *"Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: I am the First and I am the Last; **besides Me there is no God.**"*

John 17:3 *"And this is eternal life, that they may know You, **the only true God,** ..."*

Since there is but one God, the consequence of this is that He alone is to receive the praise and the trust which He as God is worthy of receiving. This reality of ONE God condemns any form of idolatry. I may not serve Buddha, because he is not God. Likewise I may not give any adoration to a creature, eg, a sports hero, for to do so is to ascribe to a person that which doesn't belong to him. See Lord's Day 34, Q&A 94, 95 which explains what the first commandment requires of us, namely, that I **know** the **only** true God and

that I ascribe to Him alone the trust, love, fear and honour due to Him. Further, if God is God, the ONLY God, it is not for me to trust Buddha, my money, my intellect, my strength, my father, the Church, etc, but rather it is for me to trust **God**, and Him only. There are consequences to my confession that God is God alone. If I confess **one** God, I must be consistent with this confession by not trusting anything besides God.

2) God is not divided in Himself. This notion is captured in the confession of Article 1 that God is a simple Being.

GOD IS SIMPLE

Simple contrasts with compound, the latter meaning 'made up of many parts'. For example, the compound word 'himself' is made up of two words 'him' and 'self'. God is simple: just ONE part. Granted, Scripture does make various statements concerning what God is:

John 4:24 "*God is Spirit*"

1 John 1:5 "*God is light*"

1 John 4:8 "*God is love*"

Yet, in spite of these three different qualifications of what God is, this does not make God compound. God is not made up of three parts, but He is SIMPLE, all the same: He is 100% Spirit, He is 100% light, and He is 100% love, simultaneously.

The consequences of confessing God to be a simple Being are:

1) There is no tension between the different characteristics of God. One cannot qualify it as a contradiction that God is both 'love' and 'just', nor can one say that these two cancel each other out. As human beings, our moods vary, and different characteristics of our selves reveal themselves at different times. But this is not true of God. In God's wrath is His love; in God's justice is His mercy. The characteristics of God cannot be played off against each other. Therefore one may never say that, though God's revealed will for me is to follow course A, He understands my situation and so will not mind me transgressing His law and following course B instead. To reason and to act this way is to play off God's love against His holiness. God is not holy one time and loving the next; He is ALWAYS THE SAME, always holy and always loving.

2) God comes to us as He is. God is not like people, who show a certain side of themselves the one day and another side the next. God always shows Himself in totality: righteous, holy, gracious, loving, wise. It is never a surprise to us who God is. There is no hidden side to God. He always comes as He is. God is never unpredictable. Tomorrow God will be as holy, merciful and just as He was yesterday, as He was at Calvary. It is of great comfort and reassurance to me to know this, for I always know what I have in my God and I always know where I stand with my God.

GOD IS SPIRITUAL

The confession of Article 1 that God is a spiritual Being is based on John 4:24, "*God is Spirit*." This characteristic has traditionally been understood to mean that God is non-physical, non-tangible, that God does not have a body like ours. Further, it means that God is **different**: there is nothing earthly about God, nothing creaturely. We are creatures and therefore tend to think in terms of creatures. However, God is Spirit which means that He is not a creature. God is Creator, not creature. God is different from us. How then am I to imagine God, to visualise Him?

The Bible speaks of God having hands, arms, eyes, ears, mouth. We understand that to mean that God has a body. We read in Genesis 1:27 that man was created in God's image, and on the basis of that we imagine that we were created to look like God. However, to be created in God's image is not the

equivalent of looking like God. Theologians describe the Bible's reference to God's hands, arms, eyes, etc, with the Greek word 'anthropomorphic.' (Anthropo = man and morphic = form). In so speaking, the point is that God speaks in the form of man. Calvin compares this to the way a mother speaks to her child; she gets down to the child's level so that the child might be able to understand what it is she has to say. Likewise the Lord, wanting us to understand what He has to say to us, gets down to our level and speaks to us in a language which we are able to understand. God is not, and does not have, a body like us. We don't know what God looks like. This too surpasses my understanding. God as a spiritual Being is a notion too great for my finite mind to grasp. God is totally different to anything on this earth.

CONCLUSION

I can as yet learn a lot more about God in order to try to understand more about who my God is. However, that does not mean that I will ever arrive at a full understanding of who He is. Many of my questions will always remain. One thing I do know with certainty, namely, that God is so much greater than I can fathom. God is **God**. I simply cannot define or describe Him adequately. The great marvel of it all is that this is the God who made **me His child**. He is the God who reached down to adopt me to be His. Fathom it I cannot. All I can do is praise God.

One day Christ shall return and then we shall see God face to face. No, we shall not at that time understand all there is to know about God, for we remain creatures, and God remains the Creator. We shall never understand Him fully, for to do so would mean to be on the same level as God, and that will never be so. On the last day various of our questions will be answered, but not all of them. God is God eternally. So great is our God that we shall never rest from praising Him.

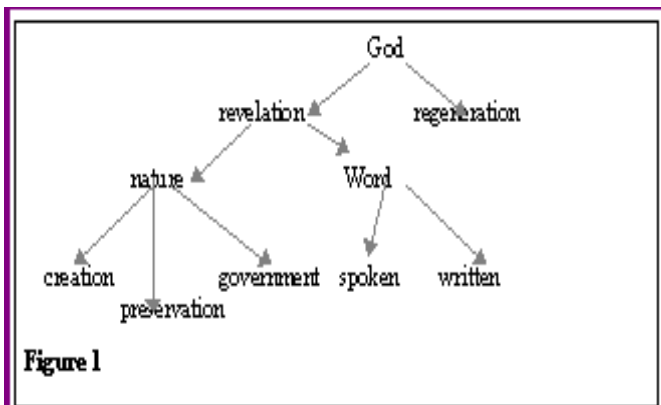
ARTICLE 2

HOW GOD MAKES HIMSELF KNOWN TO US

In Article 1, deBres confessed that there is only one God who is eternal, almighty, etc. How did deBres know this? He could not have arrived at this conviction by means of philosophising about it, or through examining his emotions, or life experiences. Thought, emotions, experience, etc, could equally well have led him to the conclusion that there is no God at all. How then did deBres come to confess that there **is** a God? Because God, by His sovereign decision, by His good pleasure, was pleased that people, sinners at that, can know something of God. God was sovereignly pleased to reveal Himself to people, so that people could know God. Knowledge of God begins with **God**; God reveals Himself.

But is anyone able to **understand** what God has to say? Can persons dead in sin understand holy God? No, that is impossible, for what is dead does not, and cannot, tune in to God. The only way for man, dead in sin, to be able to understand God is if God first **regenerates** him.

Concerning the means by which man knows God, Article 2 confesses the following: in order for man to know of God, God must take the initiative and reveal Himself to man, and man must be regenerated. God reveals Himself by two means: 1) by nature, which includes its creation, preservation, and government, and 2) by His Word.



GOD MAKES HIMSELF KNOWN BY NATURE

"We know Him ... first, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe."

In Genesis 1 we read that God **created**: He made out of nothing. God spoke and it was there. All that God created is something we so easily take for granted. However, David was once overcome with awe by it all, and this moved him to say *"The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork"* (Psalm 19:1). By creating, by what He did and by the way He did it, God revealed something of Who He is.

Read what God tells us of Himself by means of His work of creation in Isaiah 40:12. The waters of the earth He measured in the hollow of His hand, He measured infinite distance, He calculated the dust of the earth, and He weighed the mountains and the hills in scales. By the creation of the world God tells us something of Himself, and we can see it even today. It all speaks, and continues to speak, of His glory. He only had to speak and it was all there. What a God!

Not only did God create; He also **preserves** His creation. God lets all that He created continue to exist. God allows reproduction among living organisms. God is not remote from anything that occurs. He is actively in control of all that happens in His creation. It was God who let the plates below the earth shake in the earthquake that devastated Kobe in Japan last year. It is God who makes the easterlies blow night after night. Man cannot stir up the wind, nor can man stop it. But God preserves His world, and therein demonstrates something of Who He is.

God **governs** the world He once made too so that nothing happens apart from Him. All circumstances of life, including crime, homelessness, poverty, famine, come with the involvement of God's power, and demonstrates something of His mercy, power and justice. See Romans 1:18-32. This is dealt with more extensively in Article 13.

God reveals Himself in nature, but who is able to read this book of nature? Romans 1: 20 speaks of creation displaying God's eternal power and Godhead, so that any ignorance concerning God's existence is inexcusable. Every single person in the world is able to sense something of the created world and its preservation and government. Everyone can know about God because all live in this creation which speaks of His deity. But is everyone capable of concluding from it that there is a God? No, not everyone can, because although nature speaks so clearly of God, mankind is blinded to it by sin, and therefore cannot conclude from it that there is a God. To be able to understand what nature is really about, man needs to be regenerated, man needs faith. Calvin aptly stated, "man must put on the glasses of Scripture" to be able to read the book of nature.

Article 2 speaks of **we**: "We know Him by two means". By using the word 'we', deBres did not mean to say that all people can know God by the two means mentioned in Art 2. Rather, deBres refers specifically to **believers**. I am privileged to be able to benefit from the book of nature, for God has opened my eyes and so enabled me to read it. Because of His regenerating work, I can read something of what God has written in creation. That is to say, I am made able to appreciate the things He created, including the smells and textures of the flowers, the speed and agility of the mouse, the mosquito with wings that carry it though they're so very thin, the way the birds find their food. By God's grace I am made able to see something of my Father's greatness and glory.

Since my God reveals Himself to me "first" in creation, we do well, in the midst of the concerns of daily life, to pause and look at nature's display of God's glory. In Matthew 6:26 we read of God feeding the birds: "*Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?*" God shows us what He is doing in the world around us so each of us might personally be convinced of how much He cares for ME, His child in Jesus Christ.

GOD MAKES HIMSELF KNOWN BY HIS WORD

In nature God reveals much concerning Himself. Yet, God wants us to know Him even **better**. His Word speaks of His mercy, His love, His grace. Central to His Word is SALVATION. Nature does not speak of this. Nature does not teach us about Christ. "*He makes Himself more clearly and fully known to us by His holy and divine Word as far as is necessary for us in this life, to His glory and our salvation.*" In His Word God wishes to display His greater care.

ARTICLE 3

THE WORD OF GOD

Whereas Article 2 focussed on nature as the means of God's revelation to mankind, Article 3 focuses on God revealing Himself by means of His Word, both His spoken and His written Word (see Article 2, Figure 1). God not only moved men by the Holy Spirit to *speak* God's Word; He also "*commanded His servants, the prophets and apostles, to commit His revealed Word to writing...*"

GOD'S SPOKEN WORD

We can mention two means by which God spoke His word: 1) Theophany, and 2) Prophecy.

Theophany means 'an appearance of God.' For example, in Genesis 28:12, 13 we read that the Lord God Himself appeared to Jacob in a dream. None less than God Himself came to Jacob so that Jacob saw the Lord at the top of the ladder, and God spoke to Jacob. In Exodus 19:18-20 we read of God descending upon Mt Sinai. This too was a theophany. Although it was markedly different than His appearance to Jacob, God nevertheless came and spoke. Other examples of theophanies are God speaking to Moses in the burning bush, and God's revelation to John on the island of Patmos.

Prophecy refers to God **causing** people to **say** certain things. For example, Amos 3:7,8: "*Surely the Lord God does nothing, unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets. A lion has roared! Who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken! Who can but prophesy?*" Just as the obvious, predictable, compulsory reaction to a lion's roar is fright, so prophecy is the necessary, predictable, compulsory reaction to God urging one to speak. In Jeremiah 20:14 we read that Jeremiah is far from being happy at being alive. What is the cause of his unhappy disposition? In verse 7 we read that he was derided daily because he spoke God's Word. He wants to quit with speaking God's Word because it proves to be too problematic for him. He does not want to be a prophet. But God's Word is in him like a burning fire. God moved him so he **had** to say what God wanted him to say. In 2 Peter 1:21 we read that God, through the Holy Spirit, moved men to say what He wanted them to say. I don't know how God did it, I don't understand how God did it, but the fact is that God **did**. When God speaks, His Word is made known. God wants people to know Him.

GOD'S WRITTEN WORD

Wonderful as it is that God spoke, it is even more wonderful that He caused what He spoke to be written down.

1. What is written down is more *durable*. It lasts over the span of many years, despite the death of the writer.
2. A written document is also *reliable* in that it does not change with the passing of the years, unlike the message that is passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth. Think of the Chinese whisper. If the word God spoke so long ago had not been written down, we would have but little guarantee that the message we today have is the very same message which God spoke to Moses, to the prophets, to Paul, etc.

Long ago, God already loved us who live today. On account of that fact He caused His Word of long ago to be written down. "*In His special care for us and our salvation...*" By 'us' deBres meant himself and the rest of the people in the little town of Doornik in the midst of their persecution. These people held on to God's Word and believed that God had caused Moses and Paul to write what they wrote because of His special care for them in their situation in Doornik so many years later. As the apostle had written: "*Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition...*" (1 Corinthians 10:11). The words 'all these things' refer to those things written in the previous verses concerning Israel being led out of Egypt, being taken through the Red Sea, being fed with manna and provided with water in the wilderness (Exodus 16 & 17), refer also to the fact that many Israelites died in

the wilderness (Numbers 14). Paul writes that this was recorded and written down the admonition of the Corinthians of his day. The book of Exodus was written in the days of Moses, and Paul writes in his letter to the Corinthians a thousand years later that God saw to it that Moses would record specific events *for the benefit of the Corinthians*. This is the thought that deBres and his followers in Doornik confessed in Article 3, when they spoke of God's special care "for us and our salvation. The same truth is valid for us today. All that God spoke so many centuries ago through Moses, Jeremiah, Amos and Paul (to mention only these) was written down because God loves **me**. God did this as part of His special care for me TODAY. What love, what mercy, what care!! God's care for me didn't start when I was born; it started many centuries before that. So very long ago God knew what situation I would be in today, would know my moments of anguish and moments of joy, and therefore caused His Word as He revealed it centuries ago to be written down so that I might have it today. Truly, I have a God who cares for me much!

"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16,17). 'The man of God' spoken of here refers to the believer, and so includes, among others, also myself. The God Who by His grace allowed me to be His, wants me to be thoroughly equipped for every good work in **all** circumstances, and therefore He has given His Word, so that I might be complete. He caused His spoken Word to be written (be a "Scripture") for my benefit today. God's care spans the centuries. Therefore it is not surprising that David says, *"The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold, sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb,"* (Ps. 19:9,10) and *"Oh how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day,"* (Ps 119:97). Likewise we can say: if that is what God does for me, namely, caused His Word to be written down for me, I not only stand in awe in Him, but I equally **treasure that Bible**. For my sake, sinner though I am, He shows Himself in nature *plus* I get to read what He said so long ago for my benefit today.

What, then, is the Bible? It is *Father's letter to His child*, a letter which expresses His love, His mercy. I do not just shelve this letter unopened, but I treasure it, I read it. God has given me the Bible so that He may speak to me in my circumstances.

THE INSPIRATION OF THE BIBLE

Article 3 tells us that the Word of God is **inspired**: *"We confess that this Word of God did not come by the impulse of man, but that men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God."* The word 'inspiration' in 2 Timothy 3:16 means literally "God-breathed." The point here is that **God** prompted human authors in such a way that they wrote what He wanted them to write. In 2 Peter 1:21 we find a reference to speaking as a result of having been moved by the Holy Spirit: *"for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit."* In 2 Timothy 3:16 we read that the same principle is applied to the written word, for it is stated that *"all Scripture is given by inspiration of God."* So all Scripture has the stamp of God upon it. In an attempt to explain how this inspiration actually worked, a number of theories have been formulated over the centuries:

1. The Mechanical Theory of Inspiration This theory, promoted especially in the days following the Great Reformation, claimed that human authors were merely 'machines,' 'typewriters' moved by God to put down on paper what He desired to have on paper. Every sentence, every word, every comma comes then directly from God and God alone. Men were thoughtless agents putting to paper what God prompted so that the Bible is a book void of any active human thought or feelings.

The problem with this theory is that human feelings **are** in fact quite evident in the Bible: e.g. the Psalms of David which so clearly speak of his struggles, emotions, problems. See also Luke 1:1-4, where Luke tells his readers that he made a conscious effort of doing the research needed to know what to write in his gospel (see below).

2. The Dualistic Theory of Inspiration

This theory was a reaction to the Mechanical Theory, and was embraced by rationalists, for example, the

Remonstrants, at the time of the Synod of Dort. This theory claims that the Holy Spirit is the actual author of those parts of Scripture dealing with religion per se. Human authors wrote those parts of Scripture dealing with history, geography, human emotions, etc. Hence the Bible consists of two parts: writings from God and writings from people. The problem with this theory is the question of who is going to determine which writings are of the Spirit and which writings are of human origin? If each person is to judge that for himself, the consequence will be that anything in the Bible requiring, say, more self-denial than I am will to will be written off as mere human writing, with no divine authority.

3. The Dynamic Theory of Inspiration

This theory claims that the Bible was written by human authors who lived very close to God, who knew God very well and consequently wrote down their thoughts of God. It is said, then, that David and Habbakuk lived close to God, loved God, struggled much in their daily lives with questions about God's nearness, how God works in history, etc, and they recorded their thoughts and emotions in what is known to us as the Bible. We for our part can benefit from their thoughts and insights.

The problem with this theory is that the Bible is then essentially a collection of books written by man, a collection of human thoughts. Hence there is then really no essential difference between the poetry of David and that of, for example, Helen Steiner Rice.

4. The Actualistic Theory of Inspiration

According to this theory the Bible *is* not the Word of God, but *can become* the Word of God when one reads it and is taken in by what is read. Only when the written word does something to the reader, touches him, is one able to say of that portion that it is the Word of God. The problem with this theory is that the work of the Holy Spirit is moved from the time the author wrote the Bible book to the time the reader reads that Bible book. The various books of the Bible are then simply human products, essentially no different from any other human book, and becomes the Word of God today when the Holy Spirit touches the reader through his reading the Bible. One can then never lay one's hand on the Bible and say, "This *is* the Word of God."

5. The Organic Theory of Inspiration

This theory maintains that **God** used human authors, each with their own particular talents, struggles, feelings and circumstances, to write down His Word. The Lord sovereignly directed the circumstances of the human author in such a way that birth, education, gifts, research, memories, experiences, etc, were such that in and through and with the author writing his thoughts and recollections onto paper God's thoughts were put onto paper. The result is that peoples of any race or age are able to understand God's words. One cannot, then, separate God's Word and man's word in the Bible. How am I to understand this? How can the Psalms be God's Word and David's word simultaneously? The only answer to these very human questions is "I can't grasp it all, it's beyond our understanding." We don't have to know or understand either, because we are but human and God is **God**. As one cannot understand how Jesus is both God and man at the same time, so one cannot understand that the Bible is both God's Word and man's word at the same time. Luke 1:1-4 shows us something of the factors involved in the writing of the Bible. What should be noted here is what Luke says to Theophilus: "*Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed.*" Luke writes that he "followed all things closely", meaning that he did his homework; Luke went and interviewed people. For example, he went to Zechariah and Elizabeth to hear from them first hand what exactly took place in the temple; he went to Jericho to interview Zaccheaus. He then recorded what he learned. Understandably, he gave special attention to items that caught his special attention. Luke was a doctor, and hence in his gospel we read various details of the ailments from which people were healed, details we don't find in parallel accounts in Matthew and Mark. Here we have an example of

organic inspiration: a **man** at work, using his gifts of research, recording his thoughts, placing his personal stamp on his product. Here the man Luke did his work as any of us would if we were to write an article. Yet the result is God's Word, for God sovereignly caused to write what He wanted him to write.

RELEVANCE

When we read the Bible, then, we need to apply rules that are true for the reading and understanding of any book. That is, one ought to analyse who the author is, what his situation was (eg, the political climate of his time), what his purpose was for writing, who his audience was. God used human people who lived in very human circumstances, and so very human and common rules for reading are necessary for reading and understanding the Word of God. The following come to mind:

1. Scripture must be interpreted literally. That is: read what the passage says, in its natural, straightforward sense. Of course, 'literal' does not mean 'literalistic'. The passage of Scripture that says that "they eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth" (II Chronicles 16:9) to not teach that a pair of celestial eyes dash around the globe. This is something we understand too from the normal rules for reading any book or article.
2. Scripture must be interpreted by Scripture. That is: read a verse not as a lone statement, but in its context, be it the paragraph where the verse appears, the chapter in which the verse appears, the bible book in which it appears (written by the same author as a complete unity), the Bible as a whole (written by the same Author -God- as a complete unity).
3. Scripture can be understood only by the Holy Spirit. Since we are dead of ourselves, and the Bible is the Word of the living God, we do well to pray that the Lord open our hearts and minds to understand what He was pleased to say to us.

A good Bible dictionary or the introductory pages to Bible books, as can be found in the New Geneva Study Bible or the NIV Study Bible, make worthwhile reading when trying to ascertain the background of a Bible book studied at Bible study clubs. Further, the student of Scripture is referred to the excellent series of ten volumes by C vanderWaal, entitled *Search the Scriptures* (published by Paideia Press, 1978).

BIBLE CRITICISM

Bible criticism is the product of those theories of inspiration mentioned above which claim that the Bible is not fully the Word of God. For if the Bible is not fully *God's* Word, a human is free to criticise it (or parts of it). One can, then, claim Genesis 1 to be nothing more than man's impressions and feelings concerning how the creation of the world took place, and hence not factually accurate. So one can embrace the evolution theory at the same time as one claims to be a believer. Similarly, since archaeologists have found no evidence to prove the collapse of Jericho's walls as historical fact, it can be concluded that the record of this event in the Bible is merely man's way of explaining and illustrating God's power. Likewise one can deny that the waters of the Red Sea actually stood in a heap while the Israelites crossed on a dry path, and say instead that the account of that crossing is simply some person's way of trying to say that he considers God to be strong and almighty.

Bible critics encourage one to accept all that is written in the Bible 'with a pinch of salt.' One shouldn't accept too literally what one reads in the Bible, one should instead peel away the layers of hyperbole, and try to uncover the heart of the stories of Scripture. The result of this is that the Bible is emptied of its power. Why, after all, should I let the Bible determine my life, what I may or may not do, if it is essentially nothing other than a record of people's experiences so many years ago? Truly, such reasoning robs the Bible of its power and authority.

Much of Christianity today has embraced this Bible criticism. Many pulpits in the country offer stones to the people in the pew because the preacher doesn't see the Bible as the real and living Word of God. No wonder the people are not nourished. Similarly, so many commentaries available today are written without proper regard for the Bible as God's Word. It is for us, then, as we consult a commentary, to be alert for whether or not the author indeed respects the Bible as the actual and living Word of God.

TEXT CRITICISM

Text criticism is quite different than Bible criticism, and unlike the latter, is a necessary part of Bible studies. Take for example the letter of Paul to the Church at Galatia. Paul, moved by the Holy Spirit, wrote this letter and sent it to the churches of Galatia. The churches of Galatia therefore treasured it, and for lack of the convenience of modern means of duplicating this letter, individuals desiring a copy obtained one by transcribing it. One logically expects that transcription errors would have been made, each copier making his own errors, and passing these on to the next person who would not only have copied the errors, but probably made additional errors. Through such multiple copying one would expect the letter of Paul to have undergone a process of deterioration to such an extent that many years later one would scarcely be able to recognise Paul's original letter. (See Figure 1)

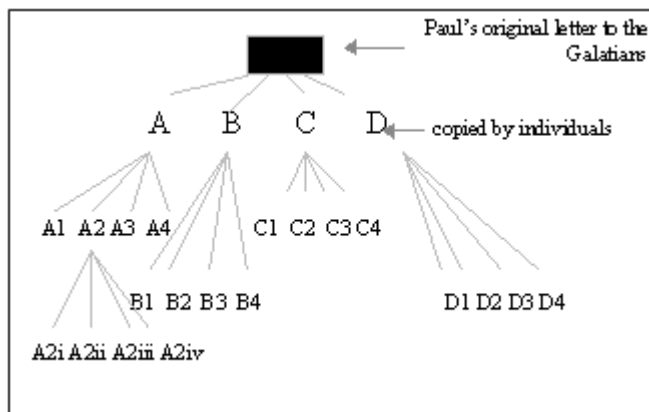


Figure1

All four individuals A, B, C, D copied Paul's letter and each passed on their copies to others for copying. **TEXT CRITICISM** is the science of determining which group of manuscripts to use in order to arrive at the most accurate Bible Translation.

Here we do well to take note of what we read in Article 3, that "in His special care for us and our salvation, God commanded His servants, the prophets and apostles, to commit His revealed Word to writing ..." This special care did not stop when Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians. DeBres speaks of God's special care for **us**, and the reference is to deBres himself and the fellow believers of Doornik in 1561. In His special care for deBres and those with him, God saw to it that deBres still had Paul's letter to the Galatians, be it by means of many copies having been made over the generations and the centuries. Though one would expect that Paul's letter had deteriorated greatly due to so many people making copies of copies of it countless times, God graciously saw to it that this deterioration did not happen. Between the numerous copies remaining to us today of Paul's original letter there is 95-97% agreement! That so little of the letter is in discussion despite so many copies made can only be attributed to God's special care for His church over the centuries, including today.

Text criticism concerns itself with the 3-5% of words in the copies of Paul's letters where copies have differences. Text criticism is the science of determining how these differences may have come about, and consequently tries to decide which copy has correctly transmitted the words Paul used. As we discuss the matter of underlying manuscripts to the various translations considered in the churches today, we do well to focus our attention not on the small degree of uncertainty, but instead on the marvel of God's preservation of His Word for us over the centuries. It's the reality of His special care for us and our salvation as demonstrated (for example) through His preservation of His Word that encourages us in the challenges of our lives today.

ARTICLE 4

THE CANONICAL BOOKS

The word 'canonical' comes from the word 'CANON', which is a Latin word for RULE, NORM, STANDARD. By calling the 66 Bible books *canonical*, deBres was essentially saying that all 66 of these books contain the rule, the norm, the standard for all of his life. Here deBres is building on what he has stated in Article 3, concerning God's care in giving us these books. His care for us is such that He ensures that we have the standard for our lives. With regard to these canonical books, nothing can be alleged against them. They contain no mistakes. Whether or not we think they contain mistakes is of no importance. God's care for us is such that what He gives us is *without fault*.

DeBres listed all 39 of the Old Testament books and all 27 of the New Testament books. Why did he list them all, and why did he state that they are canonical? How did deBres know that they come from God, that they are inspired?

THE OLD TESTAMENT

In the days of Jesus, all the Old Testament books were there, and were also understood by the Jews of Jesus' day to be THE Scripture: all 39 of them as we have them today. In Luke 11:51 Jesus speaks of "*from the blood of Abel* (i.e. the beginning of the Bible, Gen 4) *to the blood of Zechariah*" (related in II Chronicles 24:20-24, which is the last book of the Jewish OT; their OT books had a different order than we have today), and by so saying Jesus implies all 39 books of the Hebrew Scripture. We would love to know how the various books of the OT Scripture came to be acknowledged as canonical, but we don't know how it happened. We shall need to be content with the fact that Jesus accepted as God's Word the 39 books considered by the Jews of His day to be the Word of God.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

As far as the New Testament is concerned, no one decided what should and should not go into the Bible. Paul is known to have written at least 16 letters, yet only 13 of them have been included in the Bible. Man didn't decide, declare or discuss which books should constitute the New Testament. It is the Lord who led things in such a way that the Church understood these 27 books to be the (NT) Word God had given to His NT Church. As deBres confessed in Article 5, "*we receive all these books, and these only, as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith.*" We simply **receive** what the Lord puts on our path.

Why did deBres itemize which books are contained in the Old and New Testaments? DeBres did so because, at the time, he had to deal with:

1. The Church of Rome which claimed that the Apocryphal Books formed part of the Bible in addition to the Old and New Testaments.
2. The Anabaptists who said that the Old Testament presented God as a God of wrath, and that the New Testament superseded it, presenting God as a God of love. They discarded the Old Testament.
3. Luther, who claimed that the Bible contains both the Old and the New Testaments, but that the letter of James is merely a 'straw epistle' and therefore ought to be discarded.

Hence deBres, by listing all 66 books of the Bible, is making a statement against the Church of Rome which included the Apocryphal books ('Jerusalem Bibles' which include the Apocryphal books are still available today) and also against the Anabaptists for excluding the whole of the Old Testament. The Anabaptist notion with regard to the Old Testament is still very much alive today. Not only do The Gideons International distribute New Testaments (plus the book of Psalms), but this rejection of the Old Testament on the basis of it being seen as presenting a God of wrath is also very much evident in much of today's preaching; the Old Testament is seldom preached in the mainline churches of Australia.

RELATION BETWEEN THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS

The Old Testament looks forward to the cross of Christ and the New Testament looks back to the cross of Christ. In order to understand the New Testament and what it says concerning the cross, one needs to read the Old Testament. The New Testament stands in the shadow of the Old Testament. The reverse is also true. The Old Testament directs us to the New Testament and the New Testament directs us to the Old Testament. The two cannot be separated. The New Testament does not replace the Old Testament (cf Mt 5:17). Both Testaments have the one and same message: CHRIST CRUCIFIED. The Old Testament looks forward to the cross of Christ, and the New Testament looks back on that cross. They each have their own perspective, yet the message is the same. Hence all exposition of Scripture in the preaching must be 'Christ centred'. More, since one cannot understand the OT without the NT, and vice versa, it is necessary to draw the lines from old to new and from the new back to old. This Bible is ONE Word with ONE message, just as the God who gave the Word is ONE God.

This close connection between the Old and New Testaments should always be borne in mind when involving oneself in Bible study. Remember Christ when reading Chronicles and remember Leviticus when reading Galatians. It won't do to forget the Old Testament when reading the New Testament, for the Bible is one entity. Just as it goes for any other book one reads, one must start at the beginning in order to understand what follows, and the end won't make any sense if you have not read what preceded.

THE SIXTY SIX BIBLE BOOKS ARE SUFFICIENT

In his epistle to the Colossians, Paul also refers to an epistle of his addressed to the Laodiceans. Laodicea was a town close by to Colossae. Paul urged the Colossians to read this epistle to the Laodiceans: "*Now when this epistle is read among you, see that it is read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and that you likewise read the epistle from Laodicea.*" (Colossians 4:16). In 2 Peter 3:15,16 we read that Paul's writings are Scripture, inspired, God's Word. "... *as also our brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.*" So what are we to do if we should find this letter of Paul to the Laodiceans?

If God had wanted us to have it for the benefit of our salvation, or (as Article 5 phrases it) "*for the regulation, foundation and confirmation of our faith,*" then God would have given it to us. Such, we may confess, is His care and mercy for us. The fact that God has not preserved for us Paul's letter to the Laodiceans is evidence that the Lord did not consider this letter necessary for us. The Canon is **closed**. We **have** all the Word of God that God wishes us to have. Therefore the above question is theoretical. The Bible, as I have it today, is God's gift to me, for my salvation. I need no more, and confess His mercy in what I have.

ARTICLE 5

THE AUTHORITY OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

THE BIBLE IS RECEIVED

Whereas Article 1 commenced with the words "*we all believe with the heart and confess with the mouth*" (summarised in other articles by the words "*we believe*"), Article 5 commences with the words "*we receive*." Article 3 had confessed that God "in His special care for us and our salvation" caused "His revealed Word" to be put into writing. Article 4 confessed which 66 books form the Holy Scriptures, which 66 books are "canonical". Now, in Article 5, deBres goes on to say that these books are *received* by the believer.

The word "receive" implies that the believer does not *examine* these 66 books to determine whether they are canonical, nor does he utter a declaration to give them the status of being canonical. Rather, receiving these 66 Bible books is *an act of faith*. Implied in the act of receiving is the act of giving. In order for one to receive, another must give. In Article 3 deBres confessed that the Bible was God's gift. In Article 5 deBres confesses that the only fitting and correct response to such a gift from God is to **receive**. Exactly because God is God and I am only human, it is **not** for me to respond to God's gift with responses such as "I don't want it because I don't understand it," or "I can manage without it." By the words "*we receive all these books*," deBres is expressing an act of faith. He is responding to what God has done: he humbly receives what the Lord in mercy has placed in his hands: the 66 books that together form the one Word of God.

WHY WE RECEIVE THE BIBLE

For what purpose has God given these 66 Bible books? "*We receive all these books ... for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith.*"

1. The regulation of our faith

What I believe is determined, regulated, by the Bible. I do not *choose* what I shall believe, nor does any person tell me what I must believe. Rather, what I believe is determined by the Bible. I may not believe more than is revealed in the Bible, and I may not believe less either. If it is true that the Bible is God's gift to me, I must accept it in its entirety. "*For I testify to everyone who hears the words of this prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book*" (Revelation 22:18,19; see also Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32).

2. The foundation of our faith

Why do I believe what I believe? Because scientists have proven it to me, because it makes sense to my mind, or because my grandparents told me it is true? No! I believe what I do because it is what *God has said*. God gave me His Word, and so I receive it, believe it. I believe what I believe because it is contained in the Bible **God** gave to me. I don't need scientific evidence that Christ rose from the dead. I don't need proof that God fed the Israelites with manna while they walked through the desert. I accept as true all the Bible says because God's Word comes from *God*, and He cannot lie. Behind my acceptance of Scripture is ultimately my understanding of Who God is.

3. The confirmation of our faith

Life confronts me with many doubts, making me question whether what I believe is really true. .How do I in the battles of faith double check, confirm, what is true? No university study or encyclopaedia is going to answer this for me. I believe what I believe because I find that faith confirmed in the Bible God gave me.

OUR FAITH

DeBres states that the Bible was received for the regulation, foundation and confirmation of **our** faith. Whose faith is meant here? In the first instance, it refers to deBres himself, and the other believers in deBres' congregation. Their circumstances at the time deBres made this confession were such that they were being persecuted simply because they believed what the Bible says. It was life threatening for deBres and his congregation members to adhere to the Word of God. Given the risk of death, was it really worthwhile to believe the Bible? If deBres wanted to continue his work of ministry, he had to be willing to give up everything. Yet deBres continued to believe what he confessed about the Bible in Article 5 because he knew that God had given him the Bible, and it was not for deBres to decline this gift, even if it meant that others were ready to burn him at the stake because of it. It was just impossible to respond to God's gift with "no thanks God, I don't want it," or to simply leave God's gift on the shelf and not work with it. That is why deBres could confess what he did in Article 5 despite his persecution. For deBres it was a case of "My God says this is what you should believe and therefore I believe it."

Although our freedom from persecution makes it much easier for us to confess Article 5 in the last decade of the twentieth century, the fact yet remains that our faith is learned from the Bible. Simply because **God** told us what we are to believe, do we accept what He says, never mind what difficulties might result from receiving what God in mercy has given.

HOW DO WE KNOW THAT THE BIBLE IS TRUE?

I accept the Bible because God gave it to me. But how come I know that the Bible is true? How come I **know** the Bible determines what I believe? Says deBres, "*We believe without any doubt all things contained in them, not so much because the Church receives and approves them as such, but especially because the Holy Spirit witnesses in our hearts that they are from God, and also because they contain the evidence thereof in themselves;*

for, even the blind are able to perceive that the things foretold in them are being fulfilled." Here we arguments deBres uses to maintain his belief that the Bible is true:

1. By the Church

Over the years, we have been instructed by our parents and the Church. Such instruction has made an impact on us, and we follow the paths in which we were raised. This argument, though, is of relatively little weight, witness the words "not so much..., but especially...and also."

2. By the Holy Spirit

Note the wording in Article 5. "*We believe (all these books) ... **not so much** because the Church receives them and approves them ... **but especially because the Holy Spirit** witnesses in our hearts ...and also because they contain the evidence in themselves ...*" The work of the Holy Spirit receives the emphasis here. It is the Holy Spirit who makes clear to our hearts that the Bible is from God. We read in Acts 16:14 that "*a certain woman named Lydia heard us.... **The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul.***" The Holy Spirit witnessed in Lydia's heart so that she heeded Paul's preaching.

Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 2:14,15 we read why the work of the Spirit is necessary. "*But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he who is spiritual judges all things....*" The term 'natural man' refers to a person dead in sin, one who is incapable of receiving things of the Spirit. The heart of the natural man is closed. Only by the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart is it opened, so that it is able to recognise the Bible as being God's Word. Natural man cannot detect the difference between the Bible and any other book. To be able to do so is possible only through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Again, in 1 John 5:6 we read "*This is He who came by water and blood - Jesus Christ; not only by water,*

but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth." The Spirit bears witness to what Scripture teaches, namely, that Jesus came by water and blood. The Spirit testifies that this is the truth.

3. By internal evidence

The Bible contains evidence of the fulfilment of prophecies recorded in it. For example, in Genesis 15:13-16 we read of God telling Abraham, before he had any children, that he was going to have many children who would be slaves in Egypt for 400 years, that God would deliver them from Egypt and that they would depart from Egypt with many possessions. This was a prophecy that was fulfilled many years later. Another example is Isaiah 45:1. Here we read of God moving Isaiah to speak concerning Cyrus the king as early as 200 years before Cyrus was born. How did Isaiah know there would be a king by this name who would let Israel return from exile? This is evidence that the Lord God has told Isaiah what was going to happen, and see, in due time it did happen. "The things foretold in them are being fulfilled." In the course of the NT dispensation, one can see the prophecies of the book of Revelation coming to pass.

How come, then, that deBres could understand that the Bible was God's Word given to him for his benefit? Though the influence of the Church and the Bible's internal evidence were contributing factors, it was specifically the work of the Holy Spirit in his heart which ultimately caused him to receive the Scripture as God's Word. To avoid misunderstanding, it's to be insisted that the Holy Spirit does not work this conviction by means of a dream or an experience, but rather through our being busy with the Word itself.

That we for our part too accept the Bible as the Word of God is due to the Spirit's work in our hearts. This evidence of His work in us is in turn encouraging for us in the struggles of our lives.

ARTICLE 6

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE CANONICAL AND APOCRYPHAL BOOKS

In Article 6 a distinction was made between the Canonical and the Apocryphal books. As it is confessed in Article 4, the canonical books are the 39 Old Testament books, originally written in Hebrew, and the 27 New Testament books, originally written in Greek. During the years which separated the Old and New Testament times, some Jewish writers wrote some 15 books in Greek. Later on the 39 Old Testament books were translated from Hebrew into Greek. This translation was called 'the Septuagint.' Into this translation were inserted these additional 15 Greek books. The early church had to make a decision whether or not these 15 books were canonical, and it decided against this.

However, when a man by the name of Jerome translated the Septuagint (the O.T. plus the apocrypha) into Latin, he chose to include the apocrypha in his final edition. As a result, the apocrypha in time simply came to be accepted by the Church (of Rome). Hence, by the time of the Great Reformation in the sixteenth century, the Reformers inherited Bibles with the Apocrypha included. So they had to consider whether or not to continue to accept the Apocrypha, or return to the conviction of the early church. (Even till today, the Roman Catholic Church accepts the Apocryphal books, and even uses these books to prove points of doctrine. For example, the doctrine of purgatory is derived from the Apocrypha.)

DeBres, together with the other reformers, maintained what he confessed in Article 4, that only the 66 Old and New Testament books are canonical and that the additional 15 books are not the Word of God, but are apocryphal. (The term 'apocryphal' means 'hidden', and probably refers to the obscure origin of these books.) If they are not the Word of God, if they are not given by God, they consequently cannot be used for the regulation, foundation and confirmation of our faith. Therefore, one does not read them in order to find out what one must believe. One may read them out of interest or curiosity, just like one reads any other book, but they do not have the same authority as the canonical books. One may take instruction from them in as far as what is contained in them is in agreement with the Bible. This approach to the Apocrypha was accepted by the Reformation and therefore Protestant Bibles do not include the Apocrypha. (The first official Dutch translation of the Bible, the 'Staten Vertaling' did include the Apocryphal books, but they were inserted at the back of the Bible to indicate that they were not part of the Bible).

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE APOCRYPHA

Those who read the apocryphal books will sense quickly enough that they contain a different 'spirit' than we are used to from the inspired books of the Bible.

1. They reflect typically Jewish sentiments as opposed to Scriptural sentiments. For example, they show a contempt for women. The canonical books, on the other hand, do teach the notion of submission to the man, but they do not condone a contempt for women.
2. The Apocrypha emphasises good works as being necessary for earning salvation, whereas the Bible explains good works to be the evidence of gratitude for the free gift of salvation.
3. The Apocrypha contains distinct historical inaccuracies. For example, in the Apocrypha, Nebuchadnezzar is said to have lived in Nineveh, whereas in fact Nineveh was destroyed years before Nebuchadnezzar's time.
4. Many writings within the Apocrypha are fantasy.

FOR INTEREST: THE APOCRYPHAL BOOK OF SUSANNA.

Printed below, as an example of apocryphal writing, is one of its shortest books.

There dwelt a man in Babylon, called Joacim:² And he took a wife, whose name was Susanna, the daughter of Chelcias, a very fair woman, and one that feared the Lord.³ Her parents also were righteous,

and taught their daughter according to the law of Moses.⁴ Now Joacim was a great rich man, and had a fair garden joining unto his house: and to him resorted the Jews; because he was more honourable than all others.

⁵ The same year were appointed two of the ancients of the people to be judges, such as the Lord spake of, that wickedness came from Babylon from ancient judges, who seemed to govern the people.⁶ These kept much at Joacim's house: and all that had any suits in law came unto them.

⁷ Now when the people departed away at noon, Susanna went into her husband's garden to walk.⁸ And the two elders saw her going in every day, and walking; so that their lust was inflamed toward her.⁹ And they perverted their own mind, and turned away their eyes, that they might not look unto heaven, nor remember just judgments.¹⁰ And albeit they both were wounded with her love, yet durst not one shew another his grief.¹¹ For they were ashamed to declare their lust, that they desired to have to do with her.¹² Yet they watched diligently from day to day to see her.

¹³ And the one said to the other, Let us now go home: for it is dinner time.¹⁴ So when they were gone out, they parted the one from the other, and turning back again they came to the same place; and after that they had asked one another the cause, they acknowledged their lust: then appointed they a time both together, when they might find her alone.

¹⁵ And it fell out, as they watched a fit time, she went in as before with two maids only, and she was desirous to wash herself in the garden: for it was hot.¹⁶ And there was no body there save the two elders, that had hid themselves, and watched her.¹⁷ Then she said to her maids, Bring me oil and washing balls, and shut the garden doors, that I may wash me.¹⁸ And they did as she bade them, and shut the garden doors, and went out themselves at privy doors to fetch the things that she had commanded them: but they saw not the elders, because they were hid.

¹⁹ Now when the maids were gone forth, the two elders rose up, and ran unto her, saying,²⁰ Behold, the garden doors are shut, that no man can see us, and we are in love with thee; therefore consent unto us, and lie with us.²¹ If thou wilt not, we will bear witness against thee, that a young man was with thee: and therefore thou didst send away thy maids from thee.

²² Then Susanna sighed, and said, I am straitened on every side: for if I do this thing, it is death unto me: and if I do it not I cannot escape your hands.²³ It is better for me to fall into your hands, and not do it, than to sin in the sight of the Lord.

²⁴ With that Susanna cried with a loud voice: and the two elders cried out against her.²⁵ Then ran the one, and opened the garden door.²⁶ So when the servants of the house heard the cry in the garden, they rushed in at the privy door, to see what was done unto her.²⁷ But when the elders had declared their matter, the servants were greatly ashamed: for there was never such a report made of Susanna.

²⁸ And it came to pass the next day, when the people were assembled to her husband Joacim, the two elders came also full of mischievous imagination against Susanna to put her to death;²⁹ And said before the people, Send for Susanna, the daughter of Chelcias, Joacim's wife. And so they sent.³⁰ So she came with her father and mother, her children, and all her kindred.

³¹ Now Susanna was a very delicate woman, and beauteous to behold.³² And these wicked men commanded to uncover her face, (for she was covered) that they might be filled with her beauty.³³ Therefore her friends and all that saw her wept.

³⁴ Then the two elders stood up in the midst of the people, and laid their hands upon her head.³⁵ And she weeping looked up toward heaven: for her heart trusted in the Lord.³⁶ And the elders said, As we walked in the garden alone, this woman came in with two maids, and shut the garden doors, and sent the maids away.³⁷ Then a young man, who there was hid, came unto her, and lay with her.³⁸ Then we that stood in a corner of the garden, seeing this wickedness, ran unto them.³⁹ And when we saw them together, the man we could not hold: for he was stronger than we, and opened the door, and leaped out.⁴⁰ But having

taken this woman, we asked who the young man was, but she would not tell us: these things do we testify.

41 Then the assembly believed them as those that were the elders and judges of the people: so they condemned her to death.

42 Then Susanna cried out with a loud voice, and said, O everlasting God, that knowest the secrets, and knowest all things before they be:43 Thou knowest that they have borne false witness against me, and, behold, I must die; whereas I never did such things as these men have maliciously invented against me.

44 And the Lord heard her voice.45 Therefore when she was led to be put to death, the Lord raised up the holy spirit of a young youth whose name was Daniel:46 Who cried with a loud voice, I am clear from the blood of this woman.

47 Then all the people turned them toward him, and said, What mean these words that thou hast spoken? 48 So he standing in the midst of them said, Are ye such fools, ye sons of Israel, that without examination or knowledge of the truth ye have condemned a daughter of Israel?49 Return again to the place of judgment: for they have borne false witness against her.

50 Wherefore all the people turned again in haste, and the elders said unto him, Come, sit down among us, and shew it us, seeing God hath given thee the honour of an elder.51 Then said Daniel unto them, Put these two aside one far from another, and I will examine them.

52 So when they were put asunder one from another, he called one of them, and said unto him, O thou that art waxen old in wickedness, now thy sins which thou hast committed aforetime are come to light.53 For thou hast pronounced false judgment and hast condemned the innocent and hast let the guilty go free; albeit the Lord saith, The innocent and righteous shalt thou not slay.54 Now then, if thou hast seen her, tell me, Under what tree sawest thou them companying together? Who answered, Under a mastick tree.55 And Daniel said, Very well; thou hast lied against thine own head; for even now the angel of God hath received the sentence of God to cut thee in two.

56 So he put him aside, and commanded to bring the other, and said unto him, O thou seed of Chanaan, and not of Juda, beauty hath deceived thee, and lust hath perverted thine heart.57 Thus have ye dealt with the daughters of Israel, and they for fear companied with you: but the daughter of Juda would not abide your wickedness.58 Now therefore tell me, Under what tree didst thou take them companying together? Who answered, Under an holm tree.59 Then said Daniel unto him, Well; thou hast also lied against thine own head: for the angel of God waiteth with the sword to cut thee in two, that he may destroy you.

60 With that all the assembly cried out with a loud voice, and praised God, who saveth them that trust in him.61 And they arose against the two elders, for Daniel had convicted them of false witness by their own mouth:62 And according to the law of Moses they did unto them in such sort as they maliciously intended to do to their neighbour: and they put them to death. Thus the innocent blood was saved the same day.

63 Therefore Chelcias and his wife praised God for their daughter Susanna, with Joacim her husband, and all the kindred, because there was no dishonesty found in her.64 From that day forth was Daniel had in great reputation in the sight of the people.

ARTICLE 7

THE SUFFICIENCY OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

This article concerns itself with the fact that the Word which God gave us is all we need. This Bible is enough. I don't need any more or any less. It is perfectly complete, containing all that I need to know in order to be able to live for my God in this life. It contains all I need to know for my salvation. This canonical Bible provides the *complete* standard for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of my faith.

"We believe that this Holy Scripture fully contains the will of God and that all that man must believe in order to be saved is sufficiently taught therein. The whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in it at length." Having confessed this I need never worry that in the course of life I will face times when I will be at a loss as to what I must do on the ground that God hasn't told me. This gives immense comfort. God doesn't just teach me a fraction of what I need to know. No, He loves me so much that He has seen to it that He has told me **everything** He considers necessary for me to know. What **care** and what **mercy** my God shows me in revealing to me **all** I need to know to live for Him!

This is not to say that I necessarily *understand* all of God's Word. Some parts are indeed hard to understand (2 Peter 3:15,16). More to the point, though, is the fact that I am but a finite person, and sinful too. So I cannot understand all the deep things of God. However, this does not negate the fact that the Bible is complete. The failure of my understanding does not lie with God. It is **my** failure if I cannot understand or remember God's Word.

Where does one turn to for help in the struggles of this life? One turns to the **Bible**. Read Paul's advice to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3. What should Timothy do in the difficult circumstances described by Paul in the verses 1-9? Says Paul in verse 14, *"you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them."* From whom did Timothy learn them? From Paul, the man chosen by God to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles, and so ultimately Timothy learned these things from God Himself. In the midst of the hatred of this world Timothy is to hold on to the things he has learned from God, for herein is the direction and guidance Timothy needs in all the difficulties of life. So it is for Timothy (and us too) to read God's Word regularly, in the midst of the struggles we encounter day by day.

What is the purpose of Scripture? *"... Holy Scriptures...are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work"* (2 Timothy 3:15-17). By Scripture the man of God may be complete. The Word of God was able to equip Timothy fully in the face of the hatred and persecution of his day. This was true for Timothy, it was true for deBres and his congregation, and it is true for me too - irregardless of what my circumstances are. I don't need anything in addition to God's Word, for God's Word *"is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."* (Ps 119:105).

Admittedly, our hearts readily tempt us to say that the Bible is not enough. We are easily tempted to say that what God says in His Word doesn't make any sense in our circumstances. We even tell ourselves that God understands that we find the Bible's directives to be too difficult for us. Yes, the temptation is there to deny that the Bible is sufficient. DeBres too had to battle against people who said that the Bible is not sufficient. These people were the Roman Catholics and the Anabaptists of his day. Since there is nothing new under the sun, we can learn from the errors of deBres' day so that in turn we can be armed against acting or thinking as if God's Word is not sufficient for us.

THE AUTHORITY, CLARITY, SUFFICIENCY, AND NECESSITY OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

1. The Authority of Scripture

1.1. The Roman Catholic Church denies that the Bible has the final authority, and ascribes this authority

to the Church. For example, since the Pope says that Mary was without sin, one is to believe Mary's perfection on the ground that the Pope (and in him the church) has spoken. The Pope becomes the final authority.

1.2 The Anabaptists ascribe the final authority to the Holy Spirit. It is thought that the Holy Spirit tells people in His own sovereign way what course of action must be taken, for example when it comes to choosing a vocation or assuming an office in Church. What I think the Holy Spirit tells me is what I do. In theory, then, the Holy Spirit is raised above the Word of God. But in practice (since anyone can claim to receive a message from the Holy Spirit and nobody can verify it), man is made the final authority.

REFUTATION: The Bible is canonical. If it is written in the Bible, then only is it true.

We do well here to take note of Article 7: "*We may not consider any writings of men, however holy these men may have been, of equal value with the divine Scriptures; nor ought we to consider custom, or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times and persons, or councils, decrees or statutes, as of equal value with the truth of God, since the truth is above all; for all men are of themselves liars, and lighter than a breath.*" We too can easily fall for the Roman Catholic error of ascribing the final authority to 'holy' men. Augustine, Calvin, Schilder, etc. do not have the final say regarding what is truth. Remember that all men of themselves are liars. Even large bodies of men (synods) do not have the final say regarding any point of doctrine, since even a large body of persons remains a body of sinful persons. All authority lies with the Bible and with the Bible alone. It is for that reason that all communicant members are given a copy of the Acts of Synod. All communicant members are responsible (according to gifts) to stay abreast of developments in the churches, and to ensure, as best as possible, that the churches together remain faithful to the revelation God has given in holy Scripture. This will require prayerful reading and study by all of us. Authority lies not with people or with Synods, but with the Bible. All are subject to it.

Nor must we fall for Anabaptist tendencies and base our decisions and actions on what "I think." When it comes to the truth, there is no room for personal opinions or feelings. We must base all our decisions and actions on what the Bible says.

2. The Clarity of Scripture

2.1 The Roman Catholic Church says that the Bible is unclear at face value. In order to understand it one requires the interpretation of the Church. So, in deBres' time, the Roman Catholic church forbade the membership to have a copy of the Bible, and instructed the membership instead to listen to the priests, since the priests were equipped to interpret this dark book

2.2 The Anabaptists also deny that the Bible is clear. They claim that the Holy Spirit will reveal to each of us what it means. Instead of reading and listening to the Bible, then, one needs to remain open to what the Spirit might be saying to you.

REFUTATION: Is God's love and care for me such that He has given me a Word which is too difficult for me to understand? No, for that would not correspond with the kind of God He is. He has given me His Word which is clear. Yes, admittedly, I struggle to understand certain passages. The Bible itself acknowledges that some things are difficult to understand: "*Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of Scriptures*" (2 Peter 3:15b, 16). However, the point is that the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of **all** God's own so that all may understand the drift of the Scripture. Yes, some passages, or some issues may be difficult to understand, but the Bible as a whole **is** clear.

This means for us that we are not to shy away from the Bible, on the assumption that we can't understand it. It is for us instead to be prayerfully busy with the Scripture God in His care for us has given.

3. The Sufficiency of Scripture

3.1 The Roman Catholic Church maintains that the Bible is not enough. One needs the interpretation of the Church in addition to it. For many years it disallowed its members to have their own Bible. Only since approximately the last 30 years are members permitted to have a Bible of their own, but the official interpretation of the Roman Catholic Church is required alongside it.

3.2 The Anabaptists maintain that the Bible is not sufficient. One needs the Holy Spirit to give additional revelation.

REFUTATION: *"We believe that this Holy Scripture fully contains the will of God and that all that man must believe in order to be saved is sufficiently taught therein."*

So: in the midst of life's struggles, turn always and again to the Scripture. Certainly, one may (and should) consult commentaries and Bible handbooks, but the Bible first of all is important.

4. The Necessity of Scripture

4.1 As far as the Roman Catholic Church is concerned, one at bottom doesn't need Scripture, as long as one listens to what it is the Church teaches.

4.2 As far as the Anabaptists are concerned, one again ultimately doesn't need Scripture as long as one listens to the Holy Spirit.

REFUTATION: In contrast to the Roman Catholics and Anabaptists of their day, who were quite content to leave their Bibles closed, deBres and his fellow believers treasured the Bible. They reasoned that if God gives His Word to us, then it **must** be necessary. Since the Holy Spirit works faith by the means of studying God's Word, then each person must utilise that means. DeBres and his congregation were busy with the Bible, they studied it.

It is by His Word that God leads me and gives me direction for the questions and challenges facing me, no matter what my situation is. To find my answers to these questions and challenges I read the Bible first and foremost. To leave the Bible closed, to consider that the Bible is not really necessary for me in order to get through my day, is typically Anabaptist. I have confessed that the Bible is sufficient for the DAILY regulation, foundation, and confirmation of my faith. I must live this confession. I must be busy with the Bible, make it my business to study it with a concerted effort. Being busy with the Scripture is simply a matter of living consistently with the faith we are allowed to confess. To leave the Bible closed, or to study it intermittently, is to deny the matter learned from Scripture and confessed in Art 7.

ARTICLES 8 & 9

GOD IS ONE IN ESSENCE, YET DISTINGUISHED IN THREE PERSONS

SCRIPTURE PROOF OF THIS DOCTRINE

GOD IS ONE

When the apostles began their work of preaching the Gospel, they preached that God is one. This is what they had learned from Scripture passages such as Deuteronomy 6:4, "*Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one!*" Therefore Paul stated in his letter to the Corinthians, and in his letter to Timothy, that "*there is one God*" (1 Corinthians 8:6 and 1 Timothy 2:5).

GOD IS THREE

In the Old Testament one finds evidence that God is also **more** than one. While God is one, He is also three. Says Article 9, "*The testimonies of Scripture which lead us to believe this Holy Trinity are written in many places of the Old Testament.*" DeBres then selected two texts from the Old Testament, Genesis 1:26,27 and Genesis 3:22, and commented on what he read in these texts, namely, that they suggest a plurality in this one God. Other passages in the Old Testament do likewise. For example, in Exodus 3:2-4 we read of God appearing to Moses in the burning bush. Here God is referred to as 'the Angel of the LORD.' Moses also hears the voice of God addressing him. The Angel is God, but is also mentioned separately from God. The best explanation for the identity of the Angel of the LORD is that this is the second person of the Trinity: Christ pre-incarnate. In Psalm 139:1 David addresses God, "*O LORD, You have searched me and known me,*" but further on he speaks to the Spirit saying, in verse 7, "*where can I go from Your Spirit?*" Here Godly attributes are ascribed to the Spirit.

Article 9 states that whereas the Old Testament is somewhat obscure with regard to the Trinity, the New Testament is much clearer. In the course of time God increasingly revealed more of Himself. In John 5:17 we read how Jesus upset the Jews by saying, "*My Father has been working until now, and I have been working.*" Why did this upset the Jews? One finds the answer in verse 18, "*Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He ... said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God.*" In the verses 19 and 20 Jesus elaborated on this point in response to the Jews' reaction. "*The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner ... For as the Father raises the dead and gives life to them, even so the Son gives life to whom He will.*" Here Jesus is saying that the Father and the Son are one, that the Son echoes, copies, the Father. To give life is a godly action and the Father and the Son are equally capable of doing this. Inherent in what Jesus says is that there exists a simultaneous unity and separation between the Father and the Son.

At the time of His ascension Jesus said to His disciples "*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*" (Matthew 28:19). By placing the three divine persons on the same level, Jesus essentially said that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God. Paul likewise, in his conclusion of his second letter to the Corinthians, spoke of a Triune God when he wrote, "*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all*" (2 Corinthians 13:14). That God is one and that God is three, as insisted on by Scripture, was preached by the apostles among the heathens of their day, and those who accepted these two realities did so in faith.

ATTACKS ON THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

The struggles that arose over the years concerning the doctrine of the Trinity caused the Church Fathers to introduce the term 'TRINITY' in an effort to express concisely the notion that God is both one and three: a 'TRI-UNITY.' How the doctrine of the Trinity was to be understood was much debated in the early years of Church history. A group of teachers arose, known as '**Monarchians**' (mono = one; arch = ruler) who insisted that God is ONE, thereby denying the reality that God is three. In time there arose two streams of Monarchians: the 'Adoptionists' and the 'Modalists.'

Adoptionists:

The Adoptionists denied the Godhead of Christ. They claimed that Jesus of Nazareth was an ordinary man with earthly parents, Joseph and Mary. What set Him apart from other people was His godly character, His overflowing love for God and His great zeal to glorify God by doing His will. God observed Jesus' great love for Him, and responded by pouring out His Spirit on Jesus, thereby making Him a holy person - and so adopting Him for Himself. They claimed that when the Bible speaks of Jesus as being the Son of God, it refers to this adoption of Jesus by God. The Holy Spirit was then understood to be a power, a strength going out from God.

A well known Adoptionist was Arius, who claimed that there was a time when Jesus did not exist. Present day Jehovah's Witnesses are also Adoptionists.

Modalists:

The Modalists (mode = form; ie, God takes on different forms) said that God can be compared to an earthly father who wears different hats, or assumes different roles, depending on where he is. For example, one might call his father 'Dad' at home, 'sir' at school, and 'elder' at church. So it is with God: He is one God who wears three different hats, ie, He was Father in the Old Testament, Son in the New Testament and Spirit after Pentecost. From this it follows that the person who died on the cross was simply the 'Father wearing the hat of Saviour' (so-called 'patripassionism').

DEFENCE OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY: EARLY HISTORY

In the face of these heresies the early Church was repeatedly called to defend the truth. Hence the Synod of Nicea was called together by Emperor Constantine in 325 A.D. This synod declared Arius and Adoptionists to be wrong in their view regarding the Trinity. However, Arius did not relent. Eventually his opponent, Athanasius, was declared wrong in his teaching and was exiled. In fact, in the course of the following years, the Church effectively embraced the doctrine of Arius. That is: Jesus was understood to be adopted by God, not the Son of God.

However, if Jesus is not the Son of God, there can be no salvation. Lord's Day 6 explains that it is impossible for a sinner to die and pay for the sins of others. Hence in effect the whole Christian faith itself was at stake.

God led events in such a way that Arius' teaching was once again condemned by the Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D. This Council adopted a statement of faith which has become known as the Nicene Creed, as we find it on page 437 in our *Book of Praise*. On comparing the Nicene Creed with the Apostles' Creed one notices that both can be divided into three parts, according to the persons of the Trinity. The Synod of 381 simply took the Apostles' Creed and elaborated on the articles it contained in order to fight heresy and to state more explicitly the doctrine of the Trinity. For example, the opening line of the Apostles' Creed ("I believe in God the Father almighty") is expanded in the Nicene Creed to state: "I believe in one God, the Father Almighty). Further, the second statement of the Apostles' Creed ("I believe in Jesus Christ") is expanded in the second paragraph of the Nicene Creed to explain who Jesus Christ is: "*God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made...*" Again, the statement of the Apostles' Creed concerning the Holy Spirit ("I believe in the Holy Spirit) is expanded in the fourth paragraph of the Nicene Creed to explain that He is God, "the Lord and Giver of life". By placing in a creed what the church learned from the Word of God, the early church sought to arm the believers against the errors of the Adoptionists and Modalists.

Not long afterward, the confession made in the Nicene Creed was threatened once again. The followers of Arius were not about to give up. However God preserved His Church by granting that, in the course of time, yet another creed was formulated in defence of the doctrine of the Trinity. This newest creed, known as the Athanasian Creed, expanded further on the doctrine that the Son and the Spirit, together with the Father, are true God. This creed, printed on page 438 of the *Book of Praise*, condemns the teaching of the Adoptionists and the Modalists. It is stated emphatically in article 3 that, "*And the catholic*

faith is this: that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity."

GOD: INCOMPREHENSIBLE

No, after having read all three creeds, the Apostle's Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed, we may still be none the wiser as to how it is possible that the three Persons of God are one and how the one God is three Persons. The Adoptionists and the Modalists tried so hard to understand God. But no matter how hard we try, we will have to conclude that such is the greatness of God that He is **beyond** our understanding. This concept of '3=' and '1=3' simply **cannot** be understood by the finite, human mind. The Adoptionists and Modalists tried to bring God down to a human level so that people can understand how God is 'put together'. This is something we may never do on account of God's infinite greatness.

There is much God has allowed the human mind to understand. But understand my God? Understand the Trinity? No, I cannot. What shall I then do? Deny and reject it? No! All there is for me to do is to say with humility that Yes, it is enough that the Bible tells me God is one yet three, three yet one. Though this appears to me to be a contradiction, God says it and therefore the only fitting response on my part is one of humble adoration: what a God I have!

Daily I struggle with the ups and downs of life; I don't understand the various things God allows to happen to me. But really, if I cannot understand who my God is, can I expect to understand why He does what He does, also in my life? No. In my struggles and concerns it is for me to accept humbly that whatever God does, He does well. He is Yahweh, my Father in Jesus Christ, and at the same time the infinitely great, sovereign Creator of the world. This great God is my Father, and so I'm safe, very safe with Him.

ARTICLE 10

JESUS CHRIST TRUE AND ETERNAL GOD

On the basis of Scriptural evidence, deBres states that Jesus Christ is God. Evidence for the testimony of Scripture about Christ's divinity can be found in four areas:

1) **Jesus is given divine names:** Jesus is called God.

John 1:1 "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and **the Word was God.***" Verse 14 of the same chapter reads, "*And **the Word became flesh** and dwelt among us ...*" This is a reference to Christmas: Christ became flesh. Hence, if the Word is Christ, and the Word is God (vs 1), then the logical conclusion is that Christ is God.

1 John 5:20 "*And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in **His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God** and eternal life.*" Who is the true God? His Son Jesus Christ.

Romans 9:5 "... **Christ** came, who **is over all, the eternally blessed God.** Amen." Christ is God.

Titus 2:13 "*looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great **God and Saviour Jesus Christ.***" Paul says here that Jesus Christ is both **God** and Saviour.

2) **Jesus has been ascribed divine attributes:** all God's attributes are equally Christ's attributes.

Jesus is ETERNAL: unlike creatures who have been made, who have a beginning, Jesus was not made, nor does He have a beginning.

John 8:56-58: In response to the Jews, who asked Jesus how it was possible for Him to have seen Abraham, Himself not having reached the age of fifty years as yet, Jesus said, "*Most assuredly, I say to you, **before Abraham was I AM.***" Jesus ascribed to Himself an existence that reached back far before Abraham's days.

John 17:5 "*And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You **before the world was.***" Jesus was with the Father in Heaven before the events related to us in Genesis 1 occurred. He is eternal.

Jesus KNOWS ALL THINGS:

John 1:48 "*Nathanael said to Him, "How do You know me?" Jesus answered and said to him, "**Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.***" Here Jesus demonstrates that He knows **more** than the average person knows. Jesus also demonstrated this to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. In John 4:16-18 we read, "*Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here." The woman answered and said, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You have well said, "I have no husband, for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; in that you spoke truly.*" The only reason why Jesus knew that the woman's current husband was her sixth, and that they were not married was because He knows more than the average person. Not only did Jesus reveal the extent of His knowledge, but also that He could read people's minds. In John 2:25 it says concerning Jesus, "*and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for **He knew what was in man.***" People cannot do this. It is only because Jesus is divine that He knows what is on another man's mind.

3) **Jesus is involved in divine work:**

This work included the CREATION of the world. In John 1:3 we read, "*All things were made through Him, and **without Him nothing was made that was made.***" Likewise, in Hebrews 1:2 we read, God "*has in these last days spoken to us by **His Son**, whom He has appointed heir of all things, **through whom also***

He made the worlds."

Jesus is able to **FORGIVE** sins.

In Mark 2:5 we read, "*When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven you."* No person is able to do this, for forgiveness of sins is a work of God. The Scribes who overheard these words of Jesus understood that only God could forgive sins, for they reasoned among themselves, "*Why does this Man speak blasphemies like this? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"* (vs 7). In granting forgiveness Jesus revealed Himself as God.

Jesus' work involves divine **JUDGMENT**: "*For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son*" (John 5:22).

To sentence one to heaven or to hell is not the work of a creature but of God.

4) Jesus has been ascribed divine honour:

In Matthew 28:19 we read that the Son is not less than the Father or the Holy Spirit, but is placed on a level with these two Persons of the Godhead. "*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*" In John 5:23 it says that the Son and the Father are to receive equal honour: "*that all should honour the Son just as they honour the Father. He who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent Him.*" To fail to honour the Son is to fail to honour the Father.

The above list of texts is by no means exhaustive. However, they make it very clear that the Father reveals the Son to be God. Christ is not just a man. Although He is a man (see Article 18), He is also Divine, He is God. That being so, it means too that the immutability, majesty, wisdom, truth, love, goodness, etc. which we confess concerning God are equally true of Christ.

CHRIST, TRUE ETERNAL GOD, IS MY SAVIOUR

To confess that Christ is God, and therefore equally majestic, wise, loving, good, etc., means that the answer to the question 'Who is Christ?' gives all the more reason for man to stand in awe of this truth. The One who made Himself my Saviour is no weakling, nor is He an average somebody; He is none less than **God!** "*He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love,*" says Paul to the Colossians, and then he adds concerning the Saviour's identity that "*He is the image of the invisible God*" (Read 1 Col. 1:9-23). The thought is astounding, but true nevertheless: the One who died on the Cross of Calvary for my sin was **God** the Son. Philippians 2:5ff: "*... Christ Jesus... being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men.... He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.*" It is beyond human understanding: on the cross died none other than my Saviour, **true God**.

HERESIES CONCERNING CHRIST'S DIVINITY

Who Christ is has been discussed extensively in the course of church history. Already in the early days of the Church Christ's divinity was disputed. A man by the name of Arius was of the conviction that Christ is not true God. He claimed that there was a time when Jesus did not exist. Consequently this must mean that Jesus was created. Arius maintained that Jesus was not from eternity, but was the first creature God formed. To say that Christ was created means that He is not God.

In response to the struggle in the church concerning this matter, the Council of Nicea (325 A.D.) was instrumental in formulating the Nicene Creed (Book of Praise, p. 437). The Nicene Creed expands upon the Apostles' Creed by adding in Paragraph 2 the following: "*I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.*" In

opposition to the teachings of Arius, this creed confesses that Jesus is God in accordance with what the Bible says.

This statement of faith by the Council of Nicea came into disrepute in later years, necessitating the formulation of the Athanasian Creed (Book of Praise, pp 438-9). Articles 29-43 of this creed concern themselves with who Christ is. Article 29 speaks of Christ's incarnation, that is, His coming in the flesh. Concerning Christ incarnate, article 30 goes on to say that He is "*the son of God, is God and man.*" To confess that Christ is true God is no trivial matter, says article 29, but "*necessary to everlasting salvation.*" The Athanasian Creed concludes with similar words, stating in article 44 concerning all that is confessed in this creed, including too therefore the confession concerning Christ's divinity, "*this is the catholic faith, which except a man believe faithfully, he cannot be saved.*"

JESUS CHRIST'S DIVINITY IS ESSENTIAL FOR SALVATION

If I deny that Christ is God, there is no salvation for me. Arius said it years ago, and he still has many followers today. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses insist that they are godly people and that they read the Bible as the Word of God. Yet, they say of Christ that He is not God. We confess with the words of the Athanasian creed that salvation depends on the confession of Christ's divinity. Christ's divinity is therefore highly significant, and a denial of it has serious eternal consequences.

Today's world is full of 'liberal theology' which starts with the premise that Jesus was just a man like any other human being, just the normal son of two parents called Joseph and Mary, a good man, a teacher who taught and demonstrated how to live a moral life, and who concerned himself with the plight of the poor and the down trodden. Liberal theology is no more than a continuation of Arius' reasoning.

Why is it that if Jesus is not God, I cannot be saved? The Heidelberg Catechism, in Lord's Day 6, Q&A 17, states why it was necessary for Christ to be true God. If Christ had not been true God, but just an ordinary man, He could not have carried the burden of God's wrath against the sin of mankind. Then Christ would simply have perished, God's wrath is too great for any human being to carry. Had Christ perished, there would have been no salvation. Therefore, to say that Jesus is not God is to deny that Jesus is my Saviour, and hence I have no salvation. These two truths, Jesus' divinity and salvation through Jesus death on Calvary, cannot be separated. Furthermore, if Jesus is not God, none of the words that He spoke would be of any benefit either. Scripture says that Jesus speaks in the name of God. He spoke God's words. If Jesus was just any man, by what authority should we believe His words?

If the Christian faith were to deny that Jesus is God, Christianity would in essence no longer be any different from any other religion. *The* fundamental difference between Christianity and all other religions is the matter of whether salvation depends on man's reaching out to God or God's reaching out to man. In all other religions people believe they have to reach out to 'God' and somehow impress 'God' so they might in turn be accepted by 'God.' But the heart of the Christian faith is the belief that God comes to people; He sent His Son. Man didn't offer anything to God; man didn't offer a man to God. The Christian faith is God-centred, believes in salvation through the gift of God to man: His Son, true and eternal God.

ARTICLE 11

THE HOLY SPIRIT TRUE AND ETERNAL GOD

Holy Scripture gives evidence of the fact that the Holy Spirit is God, is divine.

1) **The Holy Spirit is given divine names**: the Holy Spirit is called God.

Acts 5:3, 4: "*Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to **the Holy Spirit** and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to **God**."* Note here how Peter interchanges the words 'Holy Spirit' and 'God', though still talking about the same 'person'.

2) **The Holy Spirit is ascribed divine attributes**: all God's attributes are equally the Holy Spirit's attributes.

The Holy Spirit is **EVERYWHERE**. Having commenced Psalm 139 by addressing the 'LORD,' David in verse 7 says "*Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there.*" Essentially, David is saying that the Spirit is everywhere; nowhere is he able to get away from God's presence. However, this cannot be said of any creature.

The Holy Spirit **KNOWS ALL THINGS**: No creature is able to search or comprehend the depths of God. But the Spirit is able to do so for He is God. Says Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:9,10 "*Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him. But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. **For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God.***"

3) **The Holy Spirit is involved in Divine work**:

The Holy Spirit was involved in the **CREATION** of the world. In Genesis 1:1,2 we read, "*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. **And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.***" This is not recorded for us so that we might be informed as to where the Spirit was at the time. Rather, the point of the passage is that the Spirit was doing something, He was active in creation: hovering over the face of the waters.

The Holy Spirit is also busy with the work of **RECREATION**. In Psalm 104:30 we read how it is that the Spirit renews creation, causing seeds to sprout anew each year and plants to develop new buds. "*You send forth Your Spirit, they are created; **And You renew the face of the earth.***"

4) **The Holy Spirit has been ascribed divine honour**.

In Matthew 28:19, the Holy Spirit is placed on a level with the Father and the Son. "*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*" The same is done in 2 Corinthians 13:14, "*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.*"

How was it possible for deBres to confess that the Holy Spirit is God? DeBres read his Bible, and came to the conclusion that all that the Bible says of God, namely concerning His mercy, truth, love, holiness, etc. is equally true of the Holy Spirit.

HERESIES CONCERNING THE DIVINITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Arius said that Christ is not true God. In the very same struggle concerning the deity of Christ, Arius said

that the Holy Spirit is not true God either. When the early church contradicted and corrected Arius' teaching concerning Christ's divinity in the Nicene Creed, it also corrected his errors in his teaching concerning the Holy Spirit's divinity. The Nicene Creed (Book of Praise, p. 437, paragraph 4) calls the Holy Spirit "***the Lord and Giver of life.***" To worship the Holy Spirit is not a matter of worshipping and glorifying a thing, but a matter of worshipping God. Arius claimed the Holy Spirit to be a power going out from God. However, our confession says that He is more than that; the Holy Spirit **IS God**.

THE HOLY SPIRIT, TRUE ETERNAL GOD, IS MY RENEWER

And what are **our** thoughts concerning the Holy Spirit? Unlike the Son, whom we picture in our minds as a man, we find it difficult to picture the Spirit, and consequently tend to speak of the Spirit as a 'thing,' an 'it.' It is not surprising that we cannot picture the Spirit. From Jesus' words to Nicodemus in John 3:6-8 we also learn that the Spirit cannot be visualised. Said Jesus, "*That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.*" The word for spirit is the same as the word for 'breath', 'wind'. Just as one cannot see the wind, it is equally difficult to see or picture the Spirit.

However, we are not to think of the Spirit as a thing, as a 'power' or 'an influence'. The Spirit is as much a Person as the Father and the Son. Of Him too it is true what is said of God, namely, that He is almighty, gracious, kind, holy, etc.

Specifically, of this Holy Spirit Scripture says that He is my **RENEWER**. Though I am by nature dead in sin as a result of the fall into sin (see later, Article 14), God not only ransomed me from the power of Satan by the blood of Christ (Article 21); He also renewed me by the Spirit of Christ (Article 24). That is: those ransomed from Satan's power do not stay dead in sin; they are raised to a new life, changed, renewed, regenerated. This renewing work is the work of the Holy Spirit. No creature is capable of bringing a dead corpse back to life; only God the (re)Creator can do that.

THE HOLY SPIRIT'S DIVINITY IS ESSENTIAL FOR SALVATION

What, then, if we were to deny that the Spirit is God? The consequence would be that we stay dead, despite the fact that God in Christ has ransomed us from Satan's power and justified us (see Notes on Article 24). If we are not raised to a new life, if we are not regenerated, we cannot have faith, for faith does NOT live in dead hearts. And without faith there is no salvation, for it is by faith that I am saved. Therefore, to deny that the Spirit is God is to have no salvation. Packer poses the question like this: "*But is the work of the Holy Spirit really important?*" His answer is: "*Important! Why, were it not for the work of the Holy Spirit there would be no gospel, no faith, no church, no Christianity in the world at all.*" In his elaboration on this, Packer makes the point that of ourselves we are dead. If the Spirit is not God, we could not be raised to a new life.

A second consequence follows if we were to deny that the Spirit is true God. Jesus says in John 16:13: "*However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come.*" If the Holy Spirit were but a creature, He would not be able to guide us into all truth. Nor would we have any certainty that the word He speaks would in fact be the Word of God. But as it is, true and eternal God Himself, the Holy Spirit, has given us the Bible. It was the Holy Spirit who inspired men to write Scripture. If the Holy Spirit is not God, then the Bible is worthless.

In sum: it is of critical importance that the Spirit is God. The Holy Spirit, true God, is the Author of the most important Book in my house. This same Holy Spirit, true God, lives in my heart. How close God has come to us!!

ARTICLE 12

THE CREATION OF ALL THINGS, ESPECIALLY THE ANGELS

THE CREATION OF THE WORLD

Having discussed the Person of God in the Articles 8 to 11, Guido deBres proceeds in Article 12 to discuss the work of God regarding the creation of this earth and the creation of the angels. Creation is the first of God's works revealed to us in Scripture. As with anything else God has revealed, the doctrine of creation is a matter of faith. Science cannot explain creation, nor can the human mind understand it. In the words of Hebrews 11:3, "**By faith** we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God...."

HOW GOD CREATED THE WORLD

Genesis 1 is a chapter very familiar to us all. There we read repeatedly, "*Then God said ...*". God spoke and there was light, He spoke again and the heavens, sun, moon and stars, etc., came to be. Psalm 33:6, 9 summarises Genesis 1 as follows, "**By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth.. For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded and it stood fast..**" This means that prior to God's work of creation nothing existed. It was only after God spoke that something was there.

Nothing existed prior to God's work of creation; God made His handiwork out of nothing. As Hebrews 11:3 states, 'what can be seen was made out of what cannot be seen.' God spoke and it was there. This is something no human being can do. Hence, creation points up *who God is*. Having created the world the way He did, God has revealed His greatness. Today there is much we can learn concerning God's creation. Apart from all that is visible to the naked eye, microscopes reveal and make us appreciate the many marvellous intricacies of God's creation. One need only consider the ability of a tree to transport water and nutrients from its roots to the leaves of its highest branches, the ability of plants to regenerate themselves, the many complex systems of the human body. All the minutest details of God's creation tell us something of God. In order to accept and believe that God's act of creation took place by Him doing no more than speaking, one needs to believe that God is Almighty. To consider God as being anything less than Almighty is to belittle God, and to do so results in difficulties in accepting the doctrine of creation. Hence it is not surprising that the doctrine of evolution coincided with an unwillingness to confess God as Almighty. What we are able to confess concerning creation in Article 12 is dependent on all that has been confessed previously concerning who our God is.

GOD'S PURPOSE IN CREATING THE WORLD

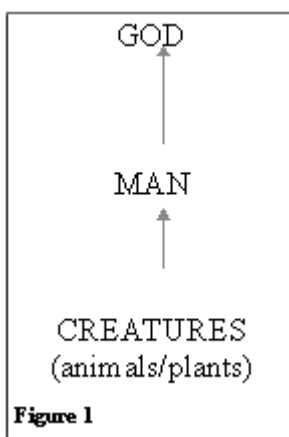
But what was God's purpose in making the world? Did God make the world because He was lonely, or because He wanted something upon which He could display His love? No. God, who has been from all eternity, was not lonely nor did He need to display His love upon something or someone. God created simply because it pleased Him to do so. God created the world for the sake of His own praise. "*The LORD has **made all for Himself...***" we read in Proverbs 16:4. The world is here for God. This is what we read in Isaiah 43:7 too. "*Everyone who is called by My name, whom **I have created for My glory; I have formed him, yes, I have made him.***" It is because God created all things that the twenty four elders in Revelation 4:11 glorify God. Worshipping God before His throne, they say, "*You are **worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power; for You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created.***"

One might well argue that it is selfish, and consequently wrong, of God to create for the sake of His own glory. However, the point here is whether one can correctly use the word selfish for God. Selfishness speaks of a deficiency, of sin, and therefore it cannot be used with regards to perfect God. God alone is **God**. He made us, creatures on earth. For me to live for myself is an act of selfishness, is sin, because I am created for God. To be selfish, to live for oneself detracts from God's honour. God created me to live for Him. God is there for Himself, and because He is God all of His creation is geared to Him. Article 12 states that the ultimate purpose of God's creation and His sustenance and government of His creation is

"that man may serve his God." God's creation, and hence man's existence too, is **God centred**. That is why Psalm 148 (as do many other Psalms) calls on all of creation to "*Praise the Lord*," including the heavens, the angels, the sun, moon and stars, the creatures of the seas, the wind, the mountains, the trees, the animals on the land, the birds, and all people. It is simply because God is **God** that all of His creation should praise Him.

It is for the sake of God's praise that each creature has been made the way it is. Then we may well consider some creatures to be useless, ugly, harmful, a pest, and we may well question why God made them that way. However, each animal's unique characteristics, including its looks, its habits, its abilities, fulfil the purpose of serving God the Creator. To use the words of Article 12, "... *He has given to every creature its being, shape, and form, and to each its specific task and function to serve its Creator.*" Every creature has been created in a specific way for God's glory. We may then have but little appreciate for a spider or a snake, but God's evaluation of each of His acts of creation -including the snake and the spider!- is this: "*And God saw that **it was good.***" True, the fall into sin took place between creation and today, and consequently God's creation suffered much damage. But this does not alter the fact that what God created was good, and all creation today still exists for the glory of the Creator.

We have many questions concerning what things were like in Paradise and what the effects of the fall into sin really were on creation. So many of these questions remain unanswered. We don't know whether or not animals killed animals for food in Paradise. But this we know for certain, that God made no mistake in what He created and that each creature was created with its own specific gifts in order to glorify God.



Not only did God create the world, but He also put a structure in place in the world, a hierarchy (see Figure 1). God created the creatures on the first days of creation so that on the sixth day man could be placed on earth to look after these creatures and in so doing could serve God. All creatures exist for man's sake so that man might in turn praise God. Concerning man's place in God's creation, Psalm 8 says, "*What is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him? ... You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen - even the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea that pass through the paths of the seas*" (Psalm 8:4-9). Man is to look after God's creation and in so doing he is to praise God. Therefore Article 12 states that God created, sustains and governs all creatures "*in order to serve man, to the end that man may serve his God.*"

THE PURPOSE OF THE REVELATION OF GOD'S WORK OF CREATION

It is important to note that the Bible refers repeatedly to God's act of creation, and does so in the context of encouraging God's people in the circumstances of their lives. For example, in Isaiah 40 we read of Israel in exile, complaining to Isaiah that God had forgotten them, no longer cared about them, didn't look after them. "*My way is hidden from the LORD,*" they said, "*and my just claim is passed over by my God*" (Isaiah 40:27). In order to comfort and encourage Israel, Isaiah, in verse 28, reminds Israel of who God is. He reminds them that God is not just a 'nobody,' but that He is the LORD, ie, Jahweh, the God of the covenant, eternal, who never "*faints or is weary.*" And it is in the context of this description of God that Isaiah reminds Israel that their God is "*the Creator of the ends of the earth.*" We understand that there is great encouragement for the exiles in the reference to their God being the Creator; their God is obviously *mighty*.

Similarly, reference is made to creation in Jeremiah 32. God instructed Jeremiah to go and buy a field. This was a perplexing instruction for Jeremiah, because the city of Jerusalem was surrounded by the superior army of the king of Babylon. To the human mind, then, the timing of this instruction to purchase land was ridiculous. But Jeremiah could not pass this instruction off as such and therefore ignore it, because it came from God. Therefore Jeremiah, struggling to come to grips with this command, prays to God for understanding. It is noteworthy that his prayer commences with a confession of who his God is, "*Ah, Lord God! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and outstretched*

arm. There is nothing too hard for You." If Jeremiah's God is the Creator, who spoke and things were there, then there can be nothing too great for Him. Then He can even deliver Israel from the Babylonians. What an encouragement for Jeremiah in his difficulties!

Psalm 148 speaks of God's work of creation. Repeatedly the psalmist calls upon persons and creatures to praise God, "**for He commanded and they were created.**" But here too the doctrine of creation does not stand on its own. For the psalm concludes with a reference to the Creator being the God who adopted a people for Himself. Verse 14 speaks of God's saints as being "*A people near to Him.*" That means to say, we are a people near to the CREATOR! The doctrine of Creation does not just stand on its own, but rather, it touches each of God's children, each one of us. What a Gospel this is, that we can say that God the Creator has made me His child. It is not for nothing that the Apostle's Creed doesn't just say in its first article, 'I believe in God the almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.' Rather, it confesses, "*I believe in God the **Father** almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.*" The inclusion of the title 'Father' makes it personal; it puts me into the picture. For if God the Creator is Father, then I am the child of the Creator. The knowledge that the Creator of the world is my Father offers comfort and perspective to my life.

Then it becomes clear to us why people in the world around us live uncomforted, for they see their lives as the products of chance; not believing in God they lack the comfort of the care this God provides to His people.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE DOCTRINE OF CREATION

Three consequences follow from the reality that God created the world.

1. The doctrine of creation determines what my relation with God must be. The doctrine of creation is fundamental to all religious and ethical questions. If He formed me, it follows that I am to acknowledge Him, serve Him. We are not our own, but belong to Him, our Creator. We exist because of Him, and therefore it is simply illegitimate and contradictory to live without Him.
2. The doctrine of creation determines what my relation with other persons and creatures must be. God made us all, and therefore we all belong together. I am then to give room and place to the other.
3. The doctrine of creation determines what my relation with the entire created world must be. The human race forms part of the created world, but at the same time has a unique place in this world. Though we have received dominion over all creatures, we are not to exploit the world selfishly (and possibly short-sightedly). "The earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness, The world and those who dwell therein" (Ps 24:1). So it is for us to treat all creation with respect.

THE CREATION OF THE ANGELS

God did not just create the physical, visible world, but also that which is invisible, for example, the angels. The Bible speaks of two kinds of angels: those that are good, called angels, and those that are bad, called demons. These demons have a leader in Satan. In Article 12 deBres has stated that God created all things, including the angels; this includes the demons and Satan. This is a point we may not forget: Satan and the demons are simply creatures. Satan is not a second god; he is not on a level with God. Rather he is a **creature**. This reality determines our thoughts concerning Satan (see below).

We do not know when God created the angels. In Genesis 1:1 we read "***In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.***" The rest of the chapter relates how God created the earth. We are not told how God created the heavens, which includes the creation of the angels. The reason why this has not been revealed to us is that heaven is not the focus of God's revelation. The focus of God's revelation is the earth. Therefore we are only told things concerning heaven in so far as it affects the earth. From Job 38:7 we know that the angels were there when God created the earth. In verse 4 of this chapter God challenges Job and asks him where he was "when He laid the foundations of the earth"; this is a reference to what is revealed to us in Genesis 1. In verse 7 we are told that when God laid the foundations of the earth "... *the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy.*" 'Sons of God' is a reference to the

angels (cf Job 1). We don't know when God created them, nor do we know how He did it. We do know that, by the time God created the world, the angels were there. More we need not know, since God has not revealed more to us. It is sufficient for us to know *that* they were there.

GOD'S PURPOSE FOR CREATING THE ANGELS

When God created, the angels did not assist God. Rather than assisting God, the angels were praising God. To praise God is the purpose for which the angels have been created. The angels exist for God's glory. That is also God's purpose for creating the world. In Isaiah 6 we read of Isaiah's vision of the Lord seated on His exalted throne. Above His throne stood seraphim, which are angels. We are not told how many there were, but we do know that they were busy giving praise to their Maker. In verse 3 we read, *"And one cried to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!'"* From the way this verse is written in Hebrew, we learn that this was a continuous cry of praise to God.

But the angels do more than praise God. They are also God's servants. In Isaiah 6:2 we read that these seraphim had two wings to cover their faces and another two to cover their feet. That is: they knew their place before God, and so showed an attitude of humility in the presence of such a God. They also had two wings with which they flew; ie they had a task to do, namely, to serve. Hebrews 1:14 tells us what this task entailed. Having made several references to the angels in the preceding verses, verse 14 reads, *"Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?"* The angels are servants, ministering to God's elect. Hence it was angels that Jacob saw in his vision when he fled from home and was on his way to Padan Aram. He saw a ladder stretched from earth to heaven, with angels **"ascending and descending on it"** (Genesis 28:12). The angels were constantly descending from heaven to earth to carry out God's commands for His people, and ascending again from earth to heaven to report in heaven what was happening on earth.

From Job 1:7 we understand that this is what angels are engaged in doing. The angels congregated in God's presence, and Satan (angel that he is) did too. God asked him where he came from, and Satan answered God: *"From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking back and forth on it."* But the contact between heaven and earth via the angels is not merely a cold, detached contact. From Psalm 91:11,12 we know that the purpose of this contact is God's care for His children. *"For He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone."* God sends His angels to earth in order to protect His people. Jacob's dream of these angels was more than just a dream. Jacob knew God to be present in Bethel; God's angels were sent to earth to be with God's fleeing servant.

In 2 Kings 6 we read how the king of Syria was anxious to lay his hands on Elisha, but was unsuccessful. He receives word that Elisha is in Dotham. *"Therefore he sent horses and chariots and a great army there, and they came by night and surrounded the city"* (verse 14). The knowledge of this does not upset Elisha, as is evident from the way in which he reassured his fearful servant. Said Elisha to his servant, *"Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them"* (verse 16). But the servant could not see this until God opened his eyes so that he saw a reality not normally seen by human eyes. *"And behold, the mountain was full of **horses and chariots of fire** all around Elisha."* (verse 17). Note how the verses 14 and 17 both speak of horses and chariots, but that verse 17 includes the words 'of fire.' Fire is a reference to God's presence (think, for example, of the burning bush and the cloud of fire which led Israel through the desert after having fled from Egypt). What the servant saw after God opened his eyes was God's army. God's soldiers are His angels. Though Elisha's servant didn't see them until the Lord opened his eyes, that didn't alter the fact that the angels had been there all the time. God sends His angels to protect His children. And we know that God does not change.

In Hebrews 1:14 we are told that the angels are there to serve those who are to obtain salvation. That was so in the times of the Old Testament, that was so in the times of the New Testament, and that is still the case today. That means therefore that the angels are spirits who minister to me too. No, I don't see them, but that doesn't change the fact that they **are** here, sent to take care of me, lest I dash my feet against the stone. With this revelation God again provides comfort to His people in the ups and downs of the life we

live. He sends me His angels to protect me (see also Psalm 34:7).

SATAN

Article 12 says that God created the angels good. Some of these angels, though, became evil. They are known to us as demons. We are not told how they became demons, nor why they fell; we're told only the fact that it happened. In 2 Peter 2:4 we read of *"the angels who sinned."* Likewise, in Jude vs 6 we read, *"And the angels who did not keep their proper domain, but left their own abode ..."* The captain of these angels is Satan. The word 'Satan' means adversary, enemy. This was not Satan's name before the Fall, but it serves to describe what he became at his fall.

The task of the angels is to praise God and to serve the elect, and even the demons are meant to do this. In order to be able to perform this task, God gave certain gifts and abilities. The task of the demons today, despite the fact that they have fallen into sin, is still to serve God and the elect. However, because they fell into sin, they don't do what they are supposed to do. Instead, they use their God-given gifts to try to detract from God's glory, they hate the elect and try to destroy the elect. Job serves as a clear example of what it is that Satan tries to do, namely, to tear God's elect out of God's hand. In Ephesians 6 we read of further efforts of the devil. There we read of the *"wiles of the devil"* (verse 11). In verse 12 Satan and the demons are given four different titles: 1) *principalities*, 2) *powers*, 3) *rulers of the darkness of this age*, 4) *spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places*. They are not just *"flesh and blood"*, people. They are instead spiritual beings, different from the creatures we normally see. They cannot be destroyed by bombs or pesticides. They are a powerful army that one ignores to his own peril. As to where they are to be found, verse 12 says they are in the *"heavenly places."* Ephesians 2 portrays these demons as existing in heavenly places; they are called *"the prince of the power of the air"* (vs 2). We know that the angels are here with us this very moment for our protection, but it is possible too that the demons are present simultaneously to try to frustrate God's work and Word in our midst.

No, the demons are no small enemy to contend with. They work to destroy God's people. They do the opposite of what they were created for. We must take them seriously. 1 Peter 5:8 urges us to *"be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour."* In Revelation 12:7-10 we read of Satan and his angels being cast out of heaven. Satan cannot go to heaven any more like in the days of Job, for Christ has since died and conquered Satan. Yet, Revelation 12:12 warns us how seriously we are to take Satan. *"Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time."* Yes, we are to take him seriously! He is here on earth with all his demons and does his utmost to tear us out of God's hand. Do not belittle the evil one, nor his temptations. Take seriously therefore the instruction of Ephesians 6:11 to *"put on the whole armour of God."* In the words of Article 12: *"The devils and evil spirits are so depraved that they are enemies of God and of all that is good. With all their might, they lie in wait like murderers to ruin the Church and all its members and to destroy everything by their wicked devices."* Remember, it was deBres who wrote this, and his circumstances at the time included persecution, false doctrine, the hatred of the Roman Catholics. Did deBres ever feel the reality of Satan's wicked devices! DeBres knew that he had to take the Devil and his demons seriously.

But it will not do for us to take Satan *too* seriously. We are not to ascribe to the devil divine qualities. Satan is not a god, nor is he almighty or all knowing. He is merely a creature, and not to be put on a level with God. Do not, then, give him too much credit! Like any other creature, he cannot move unless God permits. On the one hand, then, take Satan seriously, but on the other, not too seriously.

Having said this we thus reject the error of the Manichees, as stated in the last paragraph of article 12, who claim that the devils, uncreated, are gods beside God. This is incorrect. They were created, and are therefore only creatures.

ARTICLE 13

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD

When studying Article 13, we do well to remember who it was that wrote this article, and the circumstances in which he wrote it. In the face of persecution, and hated by the Roman Catholics, deBres' circumstances were such that he had to preach in secret, and had to visit members of his congregation after dark. Though he lived in constant uncertainty about his freedom and even his life, he penned the words of Article 13, and included them in the confession he prepared for his congregation. In the midst of the insecurity of his life, deBres in Article 13 confessed that he knew himself safe in the hands of His faithful and sovereign God.

The doctrine of providence is as much a matter of faith as the doctrine of creation. Like creation, we can only believe it; we are not able to explain or prove the providence of God. It is a doctrine which confronts us with the limits of human understanding. It raises many questions within us, questions which are unanswerable. So we do well to approach this doctrine with due humility.

Lord's Day 10 describes for us what is meant by the term "**providence**". "God's providence is His almighty and ever present power, whereby, as with His hand, He still upholds heaven and earth and all creatures, and so governs them that...all things come not by chance but by His fatherly hand." Two aspects of providence are noted: God both **upholds** and **governs** the world He created.

PROVIDENCE MEANS: 1) GOD UPHOLDS HIS CREATION

After God finished His work of creation on a particular day, all that He had made up to that point in time did not collapse, but continued to exist. After the second day, the firmament God formed did not collapse, but stayed in its place. Likewise, after God created the trees, these plants did not collapse into nothingness, but continued to exist. This is the one aspect of God's providence: God upholds the world He created, causes it to keep on existing. That creation is dependent on God for existence itself is pointed up in Psalm 104. We read in the verses 29 and 30 concerning all creatures, "***You hide your face, they are troubled; You take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. You send forth Your Spirit, they are created; And You renew the face of the earth.***" If the Lord had made the world, but then turned around and left it, it would straightaway have collapsed into nothingness.

If it is God who sees to it that this world continues to exist, it follows that the world is dependent on God., Deists, however, in the tradition of the Epicureans mentioned in Article 13, deny this. They subscribe to the philosophy that God is to be compared to a watchmaker who makes a clock, winds it up, and then leaves it on the shelf to tick by itself while he himself goes home. They maintain that God created the world, and then went to heaven and left the world to its own devices, to chance. Article 13 rejects this as a '*damnable error*,' confessing instead that God upholds the world, cares for the world, ensuring that it continues to exist. No tree, no stone, no butterfly, no human being could exist if it were not for God who upholds all things. We are totally dependent on God and this calls for **humility**. Humility in turn leads us to prayer, for it is God who gives life. It is by God's grace alone that we awaken each morning. In prayer we acknowledge this reality, thank Him for the new day He gives, and ask for His care and blessing for the new day.

PROVIDENCE MEANS: 2) GOD GOVERNS HIS CREATION

To 'govern' is to lead. Not only has God made the world and uphold it, but He also leads it. Only those things happen which God wishes to have happen. No matter what happens in this world, it is always God's will that takes place. He, after all, is sovereign (see Psalms 93, 95-99). It is from eternity that God has determined all that is going to happen. We know this from passages as Ephesians 3:11, where we read, "***according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.***" God has planned **all** that is going to happen. In Psalm 139:15, 16 David speaks of his conviction that the Lord, even before he was physically formed inside his mother's womb, knew all that would happen in David's life. "***My frame was not hidden from You, when I was made in secret, and skilfully wrought in the lowest***

parts of the earth. **Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me, when as yet there were none of them.**" From eternity the Lord determined who David's parents would be, determined that he would be a shepherd, that he would kill a lion, that Saul would persecute of him, that he would sin with Bathsheba, that Absalom his son would rebell against him. God governs so that all that He determines to happen **does** happen. God led David's life in such a way that God's specific plan for David's life took place. This was equally true of deBres who confessed in Article 13 "**that according to His holy will He so rules and governs (all things) that in this world nothing happens without His direction.**" That deBres suffered persecution was, he confessed, because his God led his life in this way. His God was the One who sovereignly upheld the world and determined that all these events should ever take place.

CHALLENGES TO THE DOCTRINE OF PROVIDENCE

The doctrine of God's providence was once acknowledged by all in the western world. Since God was acknowledged as being God, no-one denied either that He upheld and governed creation. Our day no longer believes the doctrine of God's providence. This is due to a combination of two factors. **1)** The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the development of science and technology, so that people began to **understand** why such things as thunderstorms or earthquakes happened. The modern mind looked to science for answers, and the doctrine God's providence was judged unnecessary. **2)** The twentieth century has witnessed much evil. One need only think of the horrors of Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Nagasaki. By means of sophisticated communications technology we are the more **confronted** with the evil of our day; all the horrors of this world are so very visible to us. In the face of so much evil, people have concluded that a God of love is obviously not in control; otherwise all this evil would not happen. These two realities, scientific knowledge and an awareness of so much evil in this world, have caused the people of our day to question the doctrine of providence and to deny its truth.

In this society, though, we confess with the words of the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed Sunday by Sunday. With these creeds, we acknowledge that we "**believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.**" As to the meaning of this confession, Lord's Day 9 explains it as follows, "**the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who out of nothing created heaven and earth and all that is in them, ...still upholds and governs them by His eternal counsel and providence....**" This confession puts us out of tune with the age in which we live. Yet we believe it, for Scriptures teach the continuing sovereignty of God. The doctrine gives comfort too, for, as Lord's Day 10 explains, the reality that God has created all things and still upholds them by His providence means that "**we can be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity, and with a view to the future we can have a firm confidence in our faithful God and Father that no creature shall separate us from His love; for all creatures are so completely in His hand that without His will they cannot so much as move.**" In a word: sovereign God is my Father, and my Father is sovereign God.

HOW GOD CONTROLS ALL THINGS

We cannot explain how God controls all things. This God is truly Sovereign, beyond our comprehension. We cannot grasp how He at any one moment is able to know the exact number of hairs on the heads of each of the five billion or so people on this earth. Yet that's the teaching of Scripture (see Matthew 10:30). We cannot grasp how God can ensure that not a bird anywhere on earth falls to the ground apart from Him. Yet this is the teaching of Scripture (see Matthew 10:29). God does not just lead each of these creatures at random, but He leads them according to a plan He has designed from eternity (see Psalm 139:16). To consider the logistics of this is beyond human understanding. I do not, and I cannot, understand it, for I am but a person. God, though, is **God**, and so I **believe** that my Father controls **everything** that happens on this earth. What a God this is! And this God is **my** God in Jesus Christ!

MIRACLES

When we think of miracles, we tend to limit our thinking to those incidents which are extraordinary, like a dead person made to walk again, feeding 5000 people with just five loaves of bread, or the sudden calming of a wild storm. Then we are quick to acknowledge that God is at work. The fact is though, that

God is at work in all that happens, be it an ordinary or an extraordinary event. That a dead person comes to life is certainly God's doing. However, the fact that a living thing lives, that the sun shines, that storms blow, is equally God's doing. Everything around us displays **God** at work. God is not only at work in the extraordinary incidents of life, but also in the most ordinary things we take for granted.

God normally works according to set patterns. We call these patterns "laws of nature". A miracle is an incident in which God acts **differently** than He normally does. Miracles occurred in the Bible to draw attention to the Word of God. We ought not to expect miracles today, since the Word of God is complete. In fact, Rev 13 ascribes "signs" and miracles to Satan (vs 13).

We must always consider that our God is busy in EVERYTHING that happens, including the wind that blows, the rising of the sun each morning, and birds that sing. It is our familiarity with the normal occurrences of life that prompt us to forget that God's hand is behind all that happens. Yet we are to acknowledge His hand even in the red traffic light! In the words of Article 13? "**... in this world nothing happens without His direction.**" The word 'nothing' means exactly that; *nothing* happens without His direction. Would that we think in such terms ALWAYS, with reference to ALL that happens in this world and in our lives. Then the following words of Article 13 would mean so much more to us, "*This doctrine gives us unspeakable consolation, for we learn thereby that nothing can happen to us by chance, but only by the direction of our gracious heavenly Father.*" In a time when society says 'God is dead,' we may believe that God controls **EVERYTHING**.

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY AND MAN'S RESPONSIBILITY

God is one hundred percent **SOVEREIGN**. After He created people, God commanded them to have dominion, to rule. Included in this mandate to have dominion is the notion that people are one hundred percent **RESPONSIBLE** in all things they do. This responsibility for all we do remains even after the fall into sin. This raises the question: how do we understand God's sovereignty over against man's responsibility? For example, we say that a red or a green traffic light is God's doing, yet we also know that man can and does set and adjust the timing of traffic lights.

In Isaiah 10 we read one of the prophecies of Isaiah, a prophet who laboured during the reign of the kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. The historical timing of Isaiah 10 is not known for certain. However, it was during the reign of Hezekiah that the Assyrian armies camped around the city of Jerusalem, and we may picture the prophecies of chapter 10 as dating from this time. Assyria was a dreaded world power at the time and had already conquered several cities (see vs 9). The Assyrians were dreaded because of their ruthlessness, looting, pillaging, and raping; they trampled the people like dirt in the streets of the cities they conquered. While the people of Israel were filled with dread on account of the mighty Assyrian army encamped around Jerusalem, Isaiah's task was to speak words of comfort and encouragement to God's people.

In the verses 5 and 6 we read that **God sent** Assyria to punish His wayward people Israel. "*Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger and the staff in whose hand is My indignation. I will send him against an ungodly nation, and against the people of My wrath I will give him charge ...*" Assyria was God's rod of anger, a stick in God's hand sent to punish straying Israel. God used Assyria to accomplish what He set out to do, to accomplish exactly that which God wished to happen. Then, having accomplished his work assigned by God, Assyria is punished for what it does. "*Therefore it shall come to pass, when the LORD has performed all His work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, that He will say, "I will punish the fruit of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria, and the glory of his haughty looks" (vs 12).*

Yes, Assyria was arrogant and didn't reckon with God. In verse 11 we read of boastful Assyria arrogantly setting out to conquer Israel, motivated by nothing else than imperialism. Jerusalem would be just another conquest to add to its growing empire. Boasts Assyria, "*As I have done to Samaria and her idols, shall I not do also to Jerusalem and her idols?"* God holds Assyria accountable for its arrogance. Assyria will be held totally responsible for what it does to Jerusalem; Assyria will not be able to excuse its actions, or complain to God. "*Shall the axe boast itself against him who chops with it? Or shall the saw magnify itself against him who saws with it? (verse 15).* Here we have sovereign God exercising His sovereignty

over the activities of Assyria. First God uses Assyria as a tool, and when God is done with this tool, He punishes Assyria because Assyria dared to raise its hand against God's covenant people. Here we face what to us is a contradiction. How can sovereign God consider Assyria totally responsible?! This is something we just cannot fathom. The logistics of God being sovereign and people being totally responsible are beyond what the human mind can grasp. Though we would like to understand it, we do not need to. God is God, and we but people. So it is for us to accept in faith what the Lord says about His sovereignty, and at the same time to accept that we are responsible for all we do.

While imprisoned, deBres wrote a letter to his wife (see the notes on Article 1a, page 7). This letter exuded peace and contentment. DeBres wrote this letter knowing that he would soon die. How was it possible for him to write words which spoke of contentment in the face of being torn away from wife and children? He was not bitter at the soldiers had arrested him. He was not angry because he could no longer do what he yearned to do. Why not? DeBres understood that the soldiers were merely tools used by God. Why then speak in terms of revenge or displeasure?! DeBres worked with the two realities of man's responsibility and God's sovereignty. He knew that the soldiers were responsible for his capture, but he also knew that God is sovereign and that therefore the soldiers' deeds (and his own life) were in God's control.

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY AND GOD'S GOODNESS

The problem we have with God's sovereignty in upholding and governing all things becomes even greater when we confess that God is good (Article 1). Some of the things people do are good, but people also do much evil. How do we reconcile that with God being one hundred percent sovereign? Isaiah 10:6 describes Assyria's brutality; Assyria was evil. Yet Assyria was no more than a tool in God's hand to punish Israel; simultaneously, the God of Israel is good! Isaiah 10:12 reads, "*Therefore it shall come to pass, when the LORD has performed all His work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem ...*" What was this work of the Lord? The Lord humbled His people and brought them to repentance by means of the evils inflicted by the Assyrians. *The Lord did what He did for Israel's good.*

Recall too the course of Joseph's life. In Genesis 45 we read of Joseph revealing himself to his brothers who hated him when he was but a teenager and tossed him into a pit. These were the brothers who sold Joseph to Midianite traders who in turn took him to Egypt. The Bible does not expound on how Joseph felt in response to such abuse by his own brothers. Yet we can quite imagine how Joseph, human as he was, felt. His reaction to his brothers would no doubt have been similar to the way any of us would react if evil befell us by another person's misconduct. Yet how did Joseph address his brothers when he revealed himself to them? He reminds them in no uncertain terms that they were one hundred percent responsible for what they did to him. "... *I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold into Egypt*" (Verse 4). Yet he goes on in verse 5, saying, "*But now, do not therefore be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.*" Here Joseph mentions the two notions of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility in the one breath. On the one hand he tells them that they, his brothers, abused him, sold him and at the same time he confesses God's hand in it. What would have been experienced as incredibly evil by Joseph, he nevertheless can say that it was God who did it. Joseph recognises that behind the evil was God. No, we cannot explain this.

In Acts 2 we read of Peter, on the day of Pentecost, explaining the meaning of Pentecost. "*Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves also know - Him being delivered by the carefully planned intention and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death*" (vss 22,23). Here Peter tells the Jews very bluntly, that they crucified and killed Jesus, but in the same breath says that this took place according to the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God. Consider the evil of a righteous man being nailed to a cross and having the full load of God's wrath poured out on him. Peter does not cover up the evil Christ suffered at the hand of the Jews. Yet, inspired by God, Peter also says that this evil took place in accordance with the knowledge and purpose of God. God's hand was behind it.

Once again, it is impossible for us to reconcile God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. Scriptures say

that Almighty God is good and so He cannot be the author of sin. *"Yet God is not the Author of the sins which are committed nor can He be charged with them. For His power and goodness are so great and beyond understanding that He ordains and executes His work in the most excellent and just manner, even when devils and wicked men act unjustly"* (Article 13). Joseph's brothers, the king of Assyria, the Jews, were all responsible for their unjust actions. God's acts are always excellent, good and just. *"And to His actions surpassing human understanding, we will not curiously inquire farther than our capacity allows us. But with the greatest humility and reverence we adore the just judgments of God, which are hidden from us, and we content ourselves that we are pupils of Christ, who have only to learn those things which He teaches us in His Word, without transgressing these limits"* (Article 13). We would love to understand God's actions, but here we come to the limit of what we can understand. All that is left for us to humbly say is, "Lord, help me to believe it."

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY AND OUR PATIENCE

The reality that God governs all things totally must lead to humility and patience in the face of difficulty. In the face of suffering, we are inclined to say that Satan is at work here - as if he were a second god with power similar to God. This perception leads in turn to a feeling of being hard done by, victimised by evil, and hence of being impatient.

It is true that Satan was involved in the evil Job experienced. Satan was given free reign by God to inflict suffering upon Job (with the exception of death). In the first two chapters of Job we read how Job lost his wealth and children, was covered in boils from head to toe. Job, a noble man, was made destitute, reduced to the indignity of sitting in ashes scraping his itches with a potsherd. To top it all off, his "help-meet" advised him to curse God and die. Talk about evil befalling a person! Much of the book is devoted to how Job and his friends react to the situation. Three of his friends believe Job's calamities to be Job's own fault. Yet Job maintains his innocence. Unable to understand why God lets him suffer so much evil, Job boldly challenges God. *"Let me be weighed on honest scales, that God may know my integrity... Oh that I had one to hear me! Here is my mark. Oh, that the Almighty would answer me ..."* (Job 31:6, 35).

Rather than answer Job's questions, God confronts Job with His sovereignty; see Job chapters 38-41. God challenges Job who dared to question God's wisdom. Says God to Job, *"Who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Now prepare yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me"* (38:2,3). God then proceeds to ask Job questions which serve to point up His sovereignty, that all things are in *His* control. Job is asked if he has ever made the sun to rise, if he is familiar with the depths of the sea, if he can direct the course of the stars, if he can feed the hungry lions, or if he knows when the wild animals give birth to their young. What is there for Job to say when God says to him, *"Shall the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? He who rebukes God, let him answer it"* (40:2). Job had rebuked God because of the evil God had permitted, and God's questions which he can only answer in the negative make it clear to Job the futility of having done so. He admits to God, *"Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand over my mouth. Once I have spoken, but I will not answer; yes, twice, but I will proceed no further"* (40:4,5).

In chapter 42:2-6 Job goes on to speak of the Sovereignty of God, of His providence, ***"I know that you can do everything, and that no purpose of yours can be withheld from You. You asked, 'Who is this who hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. Listen, please, and let me speak; You said, 'I will question you, and you shall answer me.' I have heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you. Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes."*** Job suffered in the true sense of the word, yet he confesses God to be God in every aspect of life. 'My life is in God's hands,' says Job. 'Shall I then complain? All comes from God.' And who is God? God is my Father for Christ's sake. God is good (see Article 1b). Job heard what God had to say and he closed his mouth and protested no more. In the words of LD 10: the "benefit" of knowing that the Creator still upholds and governs all things is that "we can be patient in adversity."

This I must remember too in the context of evil experienced in my life. Though evil might come through Satan, it does not (in the ultimate sense of the word) come from Satan. God is sovereign. *"His power and*

goodness are so great and beyond understanding that He ordains and executes His work in the most excellent and just manner, **even when devils and wicked men act unjustly.**" He lets Satan do certain things. Satan is but a creature; he is certainly no free agent, no more than the king of Assyria ever was truly free, or Hitler. The fact that 6 million Jews died in Auschwitz was no accident. God's hand was behind it. That thirty six people were shot dead in Port Arthur last month was no accident either. God's hand was behind that too. Our human logic leads us to conclude that God is then to blame for the evil we encounter. Yet the fact of His goodness means that God remains above reproach in all He does. No, we cannot understand how God's hand can be behind the evils Job experienced, we experience. This is something we can only believe, in humility. *"As to His actions surpassing human understanding, we will not curiously inquire farther than our capacity allows us. But with the greatest humility and reverence we adore the just judgments of God, which are hidden from us, and we content ourselves that we are pupils of Christ, who have only to learn those things which He teaches us in His Word..."*

Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is the God who upholds the world. He it is who keeps the world going and leads things as they happen in order to gather the Church and bring glory to His Name. If He in His wisdom determines the need for Auschwitz or Port Arthur, it will not do for me to complain. Instead, I believe that He is busy gathering His Church.

Said deBres in his particular circumstances -and each of us with our particular histories and in our particular circumstances confess this too- *"This doctrine gives us unspeakable consolation, for we learn thereby that nothing can happen to us by chance, but only by the direction of our gracious heavenly Father. He watches over us with fatherly care, keeping all creatures so under His power that not one hair of our head -for they are all numbered- nor one sparrow can fall to the ground without the will of our Father. In this we trust, because we know that He holds in check the devil and all our enemies so that they cannot hurt us without His permission and will"* (Article 13). If something happens to me, it is my God who allows it.

Who is my God? He is my Father in Christ. So much evil happens in our lives too, and we question, WHY? However, 'why' is the wrong question to ask. Ever since the fall into sin, all that there should be is death: physical and spiritual death. After all, we were all lost to Satan's side, and therefore should expect only evil. It wasn't for nothing that man was sent out of Paradise into a world of thorns and thistles. However, the great marvel is that there is good! How was this possible? Only because Christ went to the cross and took upon Himself the evil I deserved. God's wrath, which I deserved for my evil, was poured out on Him. My Father is good. Does He give me evil in return for the evil which I did? No, He doesn't. Christ paid for sin and removed the curse from the evil that happens, also the evil in my life. Therefore I know myself so safe. Evil can still happen but the curse is removed from it. God's wrath is gone for Christ has removed it.

God has His own wise reason for giving whatever it is He gives. He keeps this world going for His glory and for my salvation. Though Job suffered much, in the end he was a much stronger person, and God was glorified. Even evil comes by the will and permission of my God, and He turns it to good. Our hurts and pains remain, but the curse and sting have been removed from them. To use the words of Article 13: this *"gives us unspeakable consolation."*

The benefit of knowing that God has created all things and still upholds them by His providence is then this: *"We can be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity, and with a view to the future we can have a firm confidence in our faithful God and Father that no creature shall separate us from His love; for all creatures are so completely in His hand that without His will they cannot so much as move"* (Lord's Day 10).

ARTICLE 14

THE CREATION AND FALL OF MAN AND HIS INCAPABILITY

OF DOING WHAT IS TRULY GOOD

WHO IS MAN?

Article 14 revolves around the creature **MAN**. The majority of mankind today lives in a vacuum, unsure of who man is, where man comes from or what man's purpose is. As a product of evolution, man is just an accident. Since there is no Creator, there is no-one who decides what it is that man may or must do; there are no rights and wrongs.

TO BE MAN IS TO BE GOD'S IMAGE BEARER

The Scriptures tells us, though, that God has created us. God did not create us as animals, but specifically created us as man: human beings, people. God has taught us in His Word what it means to be human. In Genesis 1:26,27 we read that to be human means to be the image of God and conversely, to be the image of God means to be human. Not only did God say that He would create man, but He also said who man would be, what would characterise man as *man*; ie, "*in our image, according to our likeness.*" These two expressions are essentially identical in meaning.

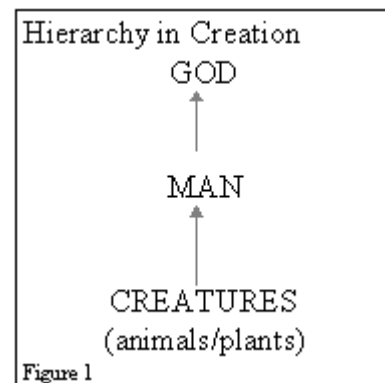
"Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness...' When did God say this? 'Then,' ie, upon completion of His whole work of creation, including the heavens, the seas, land, trees and plants, all the animals. The whole world was ready for man, like a stage is prepared for those who are to perform on it. From Genesis 1:27 we know that God did what He said He would do. "So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." We are to take note here of the fact that God speaks of creating man as male and female in the context of creating man in His own image. Here God made a distinction between the two genders, but of both male and female He said that they are created in the image of God.

TO IMAGE GOD IS TO ACT LIKE GOD

To be made in the image of God does not mean that mankind looks like God. Rather, the point of the expression 'image bearer of God' means that man **ACTS** like God. Man is God's representative. The earth which God has created cannot see God. However, God did purpose that the creatures of earth should be able to see what God is like. That is the reason why God created people: to image God. As people, we are to act as God acts, so that by looking at people one is able to see something of what God is like. As God is holy, so man is to be holy; as God is righteous, loving, wise, good, jealous, so one man is to be able to see all these attributes of God in another. One could compare this to the office of Governor General, the queen's representative, whose role it is not to look like the queen but, rather, to act like her. This means that irrespective of gender, race, age, gifts or capacities, every person has been made to image God. Each person exists for the same reason. Each person on earth exists in order to image God, so that in turn one sees what God is like and praises Him.

From Genesis 1:26 we also learn that man's imaging God is done through a further task which God has given man: "*...let them **have dominion** over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.*" To have dominion means to rule. *How* is man to rule? Man is to rule in the same way as God Himself would rule. Man is to rule in the capacity of king over all God's creatures (see Figure 1).

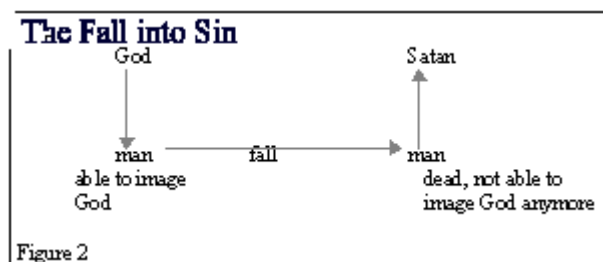
Man is to image God in the way he rules over the creatures. Man is to have dominion in the same way as God would have dominion. Not only are the creatures on earth for man, but man is also on earth for the creatures, to have dominion over the creatures. This is clearly pointed out in Psalm 8. On close observation of God's creation, David is struck by man's comparative insignificance and he says to God, "*When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you visit him?*" (vs 4, 5). Man is but small and insignificant in comparison to God's created world in which he lives. But see now what God has made man to be: "*For You have made him a little lower than God, and you have crowned him with glory and honour.*" God has made man distinctly different from all creatures, and has placed him in a class near to God, just a little lower than God. David goes on to laud the noble task that God has given man: "*You have made him to have dominion over the works of your hands; You have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen - even the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea that pass through the paths of the seas. O LORD, our Lord, how excellent is your name in all the earth!*" (vs 6-9). This high calling to which God has called man is also referred to as the 'Cultural Mandate.' Man is to rule over all God's creatures in such a way that he reflects to all creatures what God is like.



THE EFFECTS OF THE FALL INTO SIN ON MAN'S ABILITY TO IMAGE GOD.

Before the Fall into sin, we, as people, imaged God. When we fell into sin (and so deserted God's 'side' in favour of Satan's; see Figure 2) we did not become pigs or plants; we remained *people*, and hence our task to image God remained also. However, we lost our ability to image God. When we fell into sin we became dead, as we read in Ephesians 2:1 "*And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins.*"

Dead is what we became with the fall, depraved, sinful. So Solomon, at the dedication of the completed Temple, could confess "***there is no one who does not sin***" (1 Kings 8:46). Similarly David, in Psalm 130: "*If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?*" (vs 3). David admits that **every** human being stands guilty before the Lord on account of sin. Furthermore, what did God Himself see when He looked down on earth in the days of Noah, before the Flood? "... *And indeed it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth*" (Genesis 6:12). It is clear from Scripture that sin touched everyone. See also Psalm 14.



To what extent has man become depraved? How evil is man? "*Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually*" (Genesis 6:5). Here the depths of man's depravity is described in very strong language; superlative after superlative is required to expose it for what it is. Not only are man's actions, thoughts and words totally and continually evil, but the whole intent and every intent behind man's actions, thoughts and words is only and continually evil. This does not only describe man at a certain stage in the course of his life, but it characterises fallen man from the day of his birth to the day of his death. In response to Noah's burnt offering after the Flood, "... *the LORD said in His heart, "I will never again curse the ground for man's sake, although the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth ..."*" (Genesis 8:21). The imagination: the driving force behind man's thoughts is evil for the whole duration of man's life. In Romans 8:7 we read that "... *the carnal mind is enmity against God ...*" Carnal flesh, man, is not just indifferent to God, but he is in enmity with God, he **hates** God.

Scripture certainly uses powerful language to describe the extent of man's depravity. What's more, what Scripture says concerning the extent of man's depravity applies to **every** individual. Paul leaves no room for the notion that some people are more, or less, sinful than another; all are equally and totally depraved. Are Jews better than Greeks? Are we better than anyone else? Says Paul most emphatically in Romans 3:9, "**Not at all ...**" Jews and Greeks are equally guilty of sin. Paul then quotes a most condemning list of

Old Testament texts which in no uncertain terms testify to the universality and depth of man's depravity. "As it is written: *"There is **no** one righteous, no, not one; There is **no one** who understands; There is **no one** who seeks after God. They have **all** gone out of the way; they have **together** become unprofitable; There is **no one** who does good, **no, not one.**"* (Romans 3:10-12).

Nor Paul does not stop here. Not only must **all** people admit to the fact of being depraved, but **all** people must also admit the great *depth* of their depravity. Says Paul, all people are to admit that *"their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have practised deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips; whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; destruction and misery are in their ways; and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes"* (Romans 3:13-18). So deeply has man fallen that all he can do is speak evil, deceive, lie, threaten, curse, hurt, kill, destroy. Man totally lost any regard for God, and his actions and thoughts reflected this.

So where does that leave me? What kind of a person can I say that I am? The 'word picture' Paul painted of sinful man is a picture of myself. In Paradise **I** was able to image God perfectly - but I fell into sin, and consequently **I** became sinful, depraved, dead. I had been created by God to image Him, to reflect His characteristics. Yet all that **I** can do is demonstrate unrighteousness, unholiness, unfaithfulness, foolishness, hatred; the exact opposite of God's characteristics. How deep was my fall from the noble and glorious position God created me to fill, as described in Psalm 8! (See Figure 3. The fall is not partial, but from glorious top to absolute bottom).

God created Man to be little less than God.

How evil am I? Am I able to kill my own child? Am I capable of selling my own brother to foreign slave dealers? Do I have it in me to betray my parents and hand them over to death? Would I hand over a perfect man to the authorities? We'd like to answer such questions with an emphatic 'NO'! Yet Scripture does not permit that answer. The Lord is condemning of His evaluation of the human race: "**every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.**" Because people are so terribly depraved, ten sons of Jacob sold their own flesh and blood, brother Joseph, to Midianite traders. The Jews, God's chosen people, were honoured in their day to have a perfect man in their midst, a man who never sinned, but with one voice they called out to "Crucify Him, crucify Him." God made man noble, yet through the fall into sin man fell as low as he could possibly fall, rendering himself capable of doing the most atrocious deeds. Says Article 14, "... he transgressed the commandment of life which he had received; ... he corrupted his whole nature. ... Since man became **wicked and perverse, corrupt in all his ways, he has lost all his excellent gifts which he had once received from God.**"

Fall into sin

This radical extent of our depravity is echoed in the Catechism. To the question whether we are "*so corrupt that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined to all evil*", the Catechism answers with an emphatic "Yes" (LD 3, Q&A 8). Having fallen into sin, and having thereby positioned ourselves in Satan's camp, we have made ourselves capable of all kinds of evil. By nature I am not above doing the most wicked deed one could imagine. Yes, says the Catechism so categorically, I am so depraved that by nature my every imagination, intent and action is totally evil.

FALLEN MAN REDEEMED BY CHRIST

But here is displayed the glorious marvel of redemption! Whereas I had reached 'rock bottom' while I was dead, God sent Christ to the Cross for me (see Figure 4, Point 1). In so doing, God reached down into the gutter as it were, to pull me out. The great depth into which God had to reach spells out all the more the great extent of God's mercy and kindness in saving a wretched sinner like me.

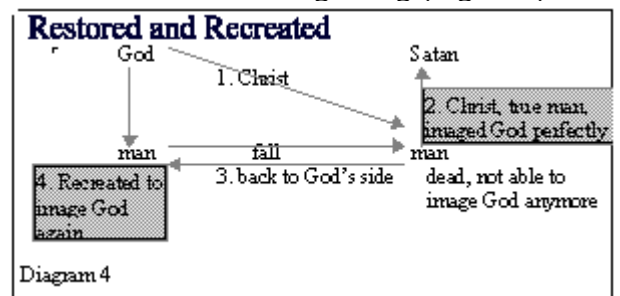
Fall not partial

God sent Christ: **true man**. As true man Christ is also the image of God. As Scripture says: "... *Christ, who is the image of God* ..." (2 Cor. 4:4). Likewise, Colossians 1:15 states, concerning Christ, "*He is the image of the invisible God.*" As perfect man, Christ images **perfectly** what God is like. Philip, Jesus's disciple, once asked Jesus, "*Lord, show us the Father...*" to which Jesus replied, "*He who has seen me has seen the Father* ..." (John 14:8,9). Jesus, without sin, as perfect as we were in Paradise, reflected God perfectly. Christ never lied, but rather showed God to be a God of truth. He never hated in a way differently from the way God hates. He never coveted, thus reflecting God to be a God who shows care to, and supplies for, His children. Christ imaged God's holiness and God's righteousness; Christ imaged God totally, reflecting all of God's characteristics perfectly (Figure 4, Point 2).

We fall, not 'halfway', but to rock bottom. Diagram 3

REDEEMED MAN REGENERATED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

In paying for sin by His sacrifice on the cross, Christ took the elect from Satan's side and brought them back to God's side: justification (Figure 4, Point 3). However, were it not for the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, man, ransomed by Christ's blood from the power of Satan, would have remained dead, paralysed in sin. As Lord's Day 3 (Q&A 8) states, man is so corrupt and only capable of evil *"unless (he is) regenerated by the Spirit of God."* God gave the Spirit to recreate man, to transform man so that he might once again be the image of God, just as God had created man to be in the beginning (Figure 4).



To the believers in the Church at Corinth, Paul writes that they *"... are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord"* (2 Corinthians 3:18). The recreating work of the Holy Spirit is mentioned in Paul's letter the Colossians, *"Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him"* (3:9,10). The 'new man' or recreated man has been recreated according to a 'pattern,' a 'mould,' namely, the image of God. Paul mentions the concept again in his letter to the Ephesians, *"... that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in righteousness and true holiness."* (4:24). Recreated man is enabled to show something of God's righteousness and holiness in his thoughts, words and actions. So Lord's Day 32 (Q&A 86) can summarise Scripture in this way: *"Christ, having redeemed us by His blood, also renews us by His Holy Spirit to be His image."*

Yet recreated man is not enabled to image God perfectly again. In the text quoted above from 2 Corinthians 3:18, Paul had spoken of **"being transformed"**. This means to say that the Spirit's work of regeneration is not an instantaneous action, but an ongoing process in the course of man's life. Lord's Day 33 (Q&A 88 & 89), in describing what conversion and the dying of the old nature means, explains it in terms of **more and more** hating and fleeing from sin. It is not until the final day that we shall be totally restored to the image of God.

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Meanwhile, we are enabled to image God again. In fact, by imaging God in our daily living, we in effect evangelise. That is: evangelism does not mean to speak of Christ at an opportune moment (though life does present such opportunities and one should make use of them), but rather, evangelism is all about reflecting God through my attitudes, words and deeds. It means always to live Christ, reflecting in my life what He is like. The ten commandments serve as a guide in this respect. Since God's characteristics are pointed up in them, a life of obedience to them will reflect God's characteristics and will image God.

Since I am allowed to be a child of God, I am allowed also to have again the task God gave to all mankind in the beginning, namely, to have dominion over God's world. In my work I am ruling over God's world, and I am reflecting what God is like. This knowledge gives perspective to my work: why I work and how I work. I am no accident, am not here by chance. I am here for a reason, namely, to show God's glory.

MAN DOES NOT HAVE A FREE WILL

Having confessed on the basis of Scripture that man is *"wicked and perverse, corrupt in all his ways,"* Article 14 rejects *"all teaching contrary to this concerning the free will of man, since man is but a slave to sin and no one can receive anything except what is given him from heaven."*

Before the Fall, Adam (and in him all mankind) did have a free will to do good or evil. He could choose between two kingdoms. He had the free will to stay with God or cross the boundary between God's kingdom and Satan's and join Satan. With the Fall, Adam (and so we all) chose to join the kingdom of Satan. As a result, Adam had a free will only in the sense that he could choose certain courses of action *within the boundaries* of Satan's kingdom. (One could compare this to being in a car rolling down hill: the descent is inevitable; all one can do is steer to the left or the right.) Having chosen for Satan, Adam had lost the free will to choose for God, to choose to cross the boundary between the two kingdoms and re-enter God's kingdom. After all, with Satan man is dead, and the dead cannot do anything.

In His plan of salvation, God sent Christ to bring the elect from Satan's kingdom over the boundary, back into God's kingdom. Those who have been returned to the kingdom of God, however, do not receive a free will. Sin remains within them, and so the saved are totally dependent on God to do any good. Man can decide to sin, ie, side with Satan, cross the boundary into Satan's kingdom, but God in His grace holds on to His elect and brings them back to His kingdom. The good that God's redeemed children do is not the result of their free will to do good but is purely the result of God's work in them. As a redeemed child of God it is my duty to do good and so I try, but I have only the Lord to thank, and not myself, for what He enables me to do in service to Him.

ARTICLE 15

ORIGINAL SIN

Article 15 takes us back to our Fall into sin as related in Genesis 3. It is true that the believer, by God's grace and mercy, has been forgiven of original sin. Yet, in spite of the forgiveness of sins, sin remains a very real facet of the believer's life on earth. The child of God experiences sin as an inescapable reality of daily life, and this bothers the child of God. DeBres has learned from Scripture that God's forgiveness "*does not mean that the believers may sleep peacefully in their sin, but that **the awareness of this corruption may make them often groan** as they eagerly wait to be delivered from this body of death.*"

WHAT IS SIN?

Sin is not simply a misdeed. To equate sin with a misdeed is to underestimate what sin really is. Sin is far more than making a mistake. Sin is *rebellion*, rebellion against God's God-ness, rebellion against my needing to submit to Him as God. Sin is that I don't want to do what I am meant to do; sin is that I want to do my own thing: rebellion. Sin, then, is not just an outward deed, but **sin is an attitude of the heart**. My heart is sinful, rebellious against God; my heart is the source of all my sins. Hence all my mistakes and misdeeds are expressions of what is in my heart. **Sin is pervasive**; sin infiltrates my whole being: my thoughts, my words, my deeds. No matter what I do, it is covered with sin because of my attitude of rebellion.

WHERE DOES MY SIN COME FROM?

After David acknowledged his transgression before the Lord in his affair with Bethsheba, he asked himself where his sin came from. His words have been recorded for us in Psalm 51:5. "*Behold, I was **brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me.***" Here David confesses that sin was present in him from the moment of his birth, yes, from the moment of his conception.

We are not to understand David to say here that sin is just one more characteristic inherited genetically from one's parents, just like one genetically inherits eye and hair colour. One cannot be held responsible for the colour of his eyes or the colour of his hair with which he was conceived. Yet the Bible definitely does hold each individual responsible for his sinfulness. Romans 5:12: "*Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, **because all sinned***". The apostle insists here that Adam sinned (and so sin entered the world), but adds straightaway that "**all sinned**". Here is an explanation of David's words in Ps 51:5. David was sinful from the moment of conception because he had sinned in Paradise with Adam already. So too ourselves: when Adam sinned, we all sinned. This matter of personal responsibility for sin (and being sinful) underlies the Bible's revelation concerning God's punishment upon sin. If I were not responsible for being sinful, if I could blame my parents for my being sinful (as I can trace the colour of my eyes to them), then God would not be just in punishing me for sinning. Hell would then be unjust for all but Adam and Eve.

ORIGINAL SIN

"All sinned", says Paul. I can only conclude from that that I myself, somehow, sinned in Paradise. My sinfulness is my own responsibility. I am sinful because I am guilty of 'original sin.' The term 'original sin' is a reference to the sin described in Genesis 3, and contrasts with 'actual sins,' ie, the sinful acts we commit day by day. Romans 5:12 (quoted above) refers to original sin, and teaches that we fell into sin in Paradise. This thought is basic to the Bible's doctrine of sin and the doctrine of redemption. If I am not responsible for sin in the first place, then I am not in need of redemption either.

How then must I imagine or understand that I am responsible for the sin of Genesis 3? Two different approaches attempt to answer this question, as follows:

1) The Realist Approach reasons that I was actually present in Paradise, and appeals to a passage as Hebrews 7:1-10. This passage recalls the episode of Genesis 14, where Melchizedek received from

Abraham one tenth of the booty he had acquired after defeating the four kings in battle, and argues that in effect the Levites paid tithes through Abraham. *"Even Levi, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, so to speak, for he was still in the loins of his father when Melchizedek met him"* (Hebrews 7:9,10). The Realist explanation for my involvement in the fall in Paradise says that as Levi paid tithes to Melchizedek through his being present in Abraham's loins (though born years later), so we were present in the loins of Adam when he sinned and so we partook in that act of sinning.

2) **The Federalist Approach** reasons that Adam was the head of the human race, and when he followed a particular course of action, the whole human race followed suit. This can be compared to a Head of State declaring war on another country. Not only is the Head of State at war with that country but his whole country is at war.

Neither of the above two approaches answer all the questions that can be raised about how I can be held responsible for an act I cannot recall (and I wasn't even born at the time!). The important point is that the Bible *insists* that **I** am responsible for being sinful. I cannot comprehend how I am personally responsible for my fall in Paradise (my sinful, limited mind cannot grasp it), but I am to admit it and confess it: my sinfulness is my own fault, I am guilty of original sin.

Since I am responsible for original sin, I am also worthy of God's wrath on sin. It would be perfectly just of God to send me to hell. Really, I deserve nothing else, because I already sinned in Genesis 3. Knowing that each person is worthy of damnation points out how great the marvel is that God does not cast all people into hell. It is God's good pleasure to save some and leave others subject to damnation. Given our own responsibility for sinfulness, it will not do for me to complain if I should find myself in hell, nor am I to complain if someone else goes to hell. Hell is justly deserved. See LD 4, Q & A 11.

At this point consideration should be given to the matter of children who die in infancy. Take for example all the victims of abortion. Can some or all of these babies, themselves victims of sin, who have not even had the opportunity to commit a sin, be sent to hell? This does indeed sound rash and harsh to our minds. However, we do well to remember that our minds are but sinful and that our feelings and emotions can stand in the way of a correct perspective on this. The issue here is, 'what does God think?' God hates sin. What is it that all people have in common? They are all totally sinful. Where do sinful people deserve to go? To hell. Where do people go unless they are saved by Christ? To hell. This is true for people of all ages, for infants as well as the elderly. Scripture says that all men sinned - and the wages of sin is death, eternal, spiritual death. I am to understand, then, that I and all people rightly deserve hell - regardless of whether or not we have committed so-called 'actual' sins. My sinful emotions may not hinder me from humbling acknowledging the sentence God rightfully may pronounce on every human being, regardless of age. Only when it is clear in my mind what I and all people by nature deserve, can I be amazed that God has actually reached out to save *some*. It is then that I can truly marvel at the fact that He also saved *me!*

THE EFFECT OF SIN

The result of the fall into sin was total depravity. The radical effect of the fall into sin is clear from what we read in Genesis 6:5 (ie, only 3 chapters after the fall into sin was related in Genesis 3): *"the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that **every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.**"* Read Genesis 4 for example; shortly after Paradise, Cain, jealous and angry that the Lord respected Abel and his offering but not his, hated his brother and murdered him. The effect of the fall into sin is that the heart is changed, depraved, corrupted. Jeremiah 17:9 states the matter most graphically: *"The heart is deceitful above all things, and **desperately wicked**; Who can know it?"* Mark 7:21-23 specifies some of the evil harboured within the human heart, *"For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these things come from within...."* There is not a single good thing left in man; he is totally depraved. This doesn't mean that all people all commit all the most radical, horrendous sins possible. Nevertheless, the fact remains that sin has so totally corrupted the human heart that, no matter what I do, it is corrupted with evil. To the human eye one sin is worse than another, but in God's eyes sin is sin.

Sin affects everything we do. Sin is all pervasive; sin touches all of life. We were not 'little innocents' at birth; even at birth we were already totally depraved and hence inclined to all evil. When our parents had us baptised, they confessed concerning us that we were "conceived and born in sin, and therefore subject to all sorts of misery, even to condemnation" (*Book of Praise*, p 587). There is absolutely no room for us to have an inflated opinion of what people are. God has given us the Bible so that we might know not only who God is but also **what we are**: sinful, totally corrupt. The Bible leaves no room for us to have positive thoughts of ourselves or of other human beings, or to think that the distance that separates God from man isn't really that great. To shrink the distance between God and man, to elevate ourselves as not being so radically sinful, involves challenging God and His revelation; it is human pride. The Bible makes it clear to me that sin is real. I sank down as low as I possibly could, and I have absolutely nothing to say to God (see Page 63, Figure 3). That man is inclined to all evil is unacceptable to society today. Long ago already, Pelagius (c. 355-c.425) taught the early church to think positively of people. According to Pelagius people are born blank, like a sheet of paper, on which one can write either purity or filth. It would therefore, he said, be possible for a child to grow up without sin (eg, on an island), if the child were not exposed to any examples of sin. Pelagians believe that "*sin is only a matter of imitation*" (Article 15). Pelagius' positive evaluation of mankind is attractive to sinful people; here is evidence of our sinfulness. Arminius at the time of the Synod of Dort built on the work of Pelagius. And Arminianism is highly popular in Christian circles today (see Article 16, page 72).

The Lord, though, has revealed something much different concerning our identity. To know what we are, and to know what our children are, leads us to an attitude of humility. If my sinfulness is my own fault, as a result of my own transgression in Paradise, there remains no room for me to challenge God concerning anything He does in my life. On account of my own transgression, I deserve only evil - and I readily acknowledge this humbling reality. More, to accept the reality of original sin is to open the way for marvelling at the great gift God has given in Jesus Christ. Given my depravity, this gift of salvation is indeed the *great surprise* of the Gospel, and it moves to hearty praise for a God of such mercy.

FORGIVEN AND RENEWED, BUT NOT YET PERFECTED

God in unfathomable mercy has given His only Son to pay for my sins, both original and actual. He has also given me the Holy Spirit and so renewed me (see Article 24). However, this does not mean that I have already been made perfect. Even today I am still corrupt and inclined to all manner of evil. Says Article 15, sin "*is not abolished nor eradicated even by baptism, for sin continually streams forth like water welling up from this woeful source.*" Should I then be surprised if I would commit David's sin? No, I shouldn't be surprised at all. Dismayed, yes; but surprised, no. I shouldn't be surprised because my heart remains sinful.

Paul knew this so well. Read what he writes in his letter to the Romans in chapter 7:18,19. "*For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practise.*" Paul writes this after his conversion; after he became a Christian. Like Paul, I can desire to do what is right, but I just do not have what it takes to do it. I am forgiven and renewed, but I am not yet made perfect. That is why Jesus taught His disciples (and so all of us) to pray for forgiveness of sins and to ask God not to lead us into temptation. Though regenerated by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, we remain "so weak that we cannot stand even for a moment" (Lord's Day 52). Or, as Lord's Day 51 says it with Paul in Romans 7:24: we remain "wretched sinners". So the Heidelberg Catechism can summarise Scripture in Lord's Day 44 like this: "*In this life even the holiest (think, for example, of David or Peter) have only a small beginning*" of the obedience God requires. David committed adultery and Peter denied the Lord Jesus three times. They too wanted to serve the Lord, but couldn't get above sin. Nor should I think that I can do better.

This is no reason to cease struggling against sin. In Lord's Day 44 the Christian confesses that "*with earnest purpose [the Christian does] begin to live not only according to some but to all the commandments of God.*" Yes, I must fight sin zealously, but I must not delude myself that I can get above sin.

We do well, then, never to be surprised at sin. Sin remains in the child of God a powerful force. It will never do for me to look down at another because of the sins into which the other fell. In the face of another's sin, it is for me humbly to acknowledge that I would commit the same sin if God did not hold on to me. So there is no place for pointing a finger at another. There is place only for the humble cry: "Lord, hold on to me, for I am still so sinful and I need You" (see LD 52).

This humble attitude also moves me to accept what God says concerning what is right and what is sinful; I am too sinful to be able to judge well. This realisation makes me reach out for Scripture, seeking God's direction from His Word and asking God in prayer to show me the way.

The radical extent of our sinfulness is something we so badly need to acknowledge. We live in a time when not only the world, but also Christianity in general thinks positively of the person. Evangelicalism has taken on a heavy strain of Pelagianism/Arminianism; man (it is said) is not right down on the bottom rung, but somewhere higher up the ladder. We do well, however, to echo the unflattering terms Scripture uses concerning what man is, what I am. In the words of our article, "... *the awareness of this corruption may make (believers) often groan as they eagerly wait to be delivered from this body of death.*" This is what Paul expresses in 1 Corinthians 15:53-57. He longs to be released from this body of death, when the power of sin shall be totally removed. "*For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory? The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."* There comes a day when we **will be relieved** from the clutches of sin.

ARTICLE 16

DIVINE ELECTION

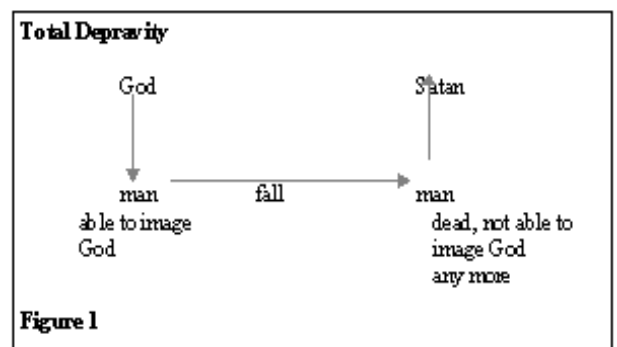
NOTE: to understand the material confessed in Article 16, the reader is encouraged to read the Canons of Dort. In that confession, the material of Article 16 is explained and defended in the face of heresy.

ORIGINAL SIN

Article 15 confessed that all people are guilty of original sin. God had created man perfect and capable of performing God's will perfectly. However, with the fall into sin, man fell from his high position. Through the fall man broke the bond with God and established a bond with Satan. Why, though, did man fall into sin? Had man been created with a deficiency by the Creator? Was man compelled to sin? Both these questions must be answered in the negative. Man fell into sin by his *own free will*. The blame lies with no one but man himself; it was man's own fault; all are guilty.

TOTAL DEPRAVITY

As a result of the fall into sin, man lost all his good qualities; man became dead in sin. *"And you He made alive, who were **dead in trespasses and sins**"* (Ephesians 2:1). To be dead is to be lifeless, inactive. A dead person does nothing and is not capable of doing anything. Man, because of his 'deadness,' made himself unattractive to God. In not a single person was there anything positive which motivated God to say, "I'll save that person." Rather than imaging God, all men imaged Satan. The Canons of Dort use the phrase 'Total Depravity' to describe man's state of death after the Fall (see Figure 1).



This death rendered man even incapable of reaching out to God for help. The dead simply cannot reach out. What did **God** then do? The surprise of the Gospel is this: *God reached out to man!* This is **mercy** indeed. God came to us in Christ. What makes this mercy even more profound is that God showed His mercy to *ME!* The wealth and the marvel of this mercy I can appreciate only if I first acknowledge my guilt in falling into sin and making myself 'dead in sin.' That is: I can appreciate this mercy only if I first acknowledge my total depravity.

Christ was sent by God to save people from sin, to deliver people from Satan's side and return them to God's side. But who does Christ save? After the fall into sin, the entire human race was on Satan's side. Did Christ deliver the entire human race from Satan? No, He did not. Concerning Mary's expected Son, the angel said to Joseph, *"you shall call his name JESUS, for he will save **his people** from their sins"* (Matthew 1:21). We do not read here that Jesus will save *people*, or *good* people, or *all* people; no, He will save **His** people. Hence some people will be saved, while others will not be saved. This is the doctrine of election: that **those may be saved whom the Father has given to Jesus** (John 17).

ELECTION

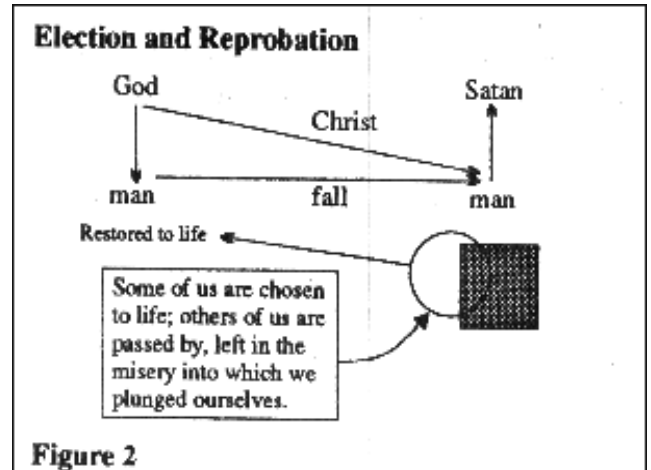
To elect is to choose. In the context of our fall into sin, the term refers to God choosing for salvation some from the total world population that had fallen into sin and joined Satan. The notion of election to salvation is taught in Scripture. In Ephesians 1:4 and 5, we read that God has chosen, predestined certain persons; *"Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world ... having predestined us ..."* Likewise, in Romans 8:28-30 we read about *"**those** who are called according to His purpose ... **whom** He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son ... **whom** He predestined, **these** He also called; **whom** He called, **these** He also justified; and **whom** He justified, **these** He also glorified."* In these verses we repeatedly read what God does for some, not all. Similarly, in Acts 13:48 we read that not all in Antioch believed the Gospel delivered to them by Paul and Barnabas, but only *"as many as had*

been appointed to eternal life believed." Only as many believed as had previously been designated for receiving eternal life.

The Canons of Dort, chapter 1, article 7 defines election as follows, "*Election is the unchangeable purpose of God whereby...He has...chosen in Christ to salvation a definite number of persons.*" Election is God's deed of choosing **some** from Satan's side with the purpose of bringing these limited number of persons back to His side again.

REPROBATION

Whereas election is God's act of choosing and taking some from Satan's side and returning them to Himself, reprobation refers to God passing others by. These persons are consequently left in the misery into which they had plunged themselves. "*Holy Scripture .. further declares that not all men are elect but that some have not been elected, or have been passed by in the eternal election of God. Out of His most free, most just, blameless, and unchangeable good pleasure, God has decreed to leave them in the common misery into which they have by their own fault plunged themselves, and not to give them saving faith and the grace of conversion*" (Canons of Dort, chapter 1, article 16). Whereas election is God's active deed of choosing, reprobation is God's passive act of leaving people, passing them by (see Figure 2).



Although our salvation is a consequence of our election, we cannot argue that people are lost because they are reprobate, or that some are destined for hell because God sent them there. Through our own fault, we all joined Satan's side and so were all destined for hell. God, though, was pleased to save **some** from hell - and so point up His mercy and His justice.

Article 16 speaks in terms of "*mercy and justice.*" Election, that God chose some, is mercy. Given that we fell into sin by our own fault, God did not have to save any. That He saved some is most profound mercy. That God left others with Satan is justice. We of our own accord joined Satan, and it is just of God to leave us where we put ourselves. We would have only ourselves to thank if God had passed us by and left us with Satan, but the credit for ending up back with God is God's alone, for it is He that brought us back.

SCRIPTURAL EVIDENCE FOR REPROBATION

Revelation 13:8, "*And all who dwell on the earth will worship him (the beast), whose names have not been written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.*" The book of life contains only the names of the elect, those chosen to life. The fact that some names do not appear in the book of life means nothing else than that these persons shall not receive life. They have been passed by. See also Revelation 17:8.

In 1 Peter 2: 8 we read of people being offended at the gospel of Christ. In connection with this offence, Peter quotes from Isaiah, saying, "*The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone,*" and "*A stone of stumbling and a rock of offence.*" Why do they stumble? Says Peter, "**They stumble, being disobedient to the word, to which they also were appointed.**" That they should stumble at the Gospel was God's divine will for them; God appointed that reaction. This is reprobation.

Romans 9:22, "*What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much long-suffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction.*" Verse 23 on the other hand speaks of "*vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory.*" The imagery of "vessels" refers to persons created by God for purposes of His own choosing, be it for salvation or for damnation.

IS THE DOCTRINE OF ELECTION FAIR?

In Romans 9 we read, "*Jacob have I loved, but Esau I have hated*" (vs 13). Yet, Paul says, this election of the one on God's part does not mean that there is unrighteousness with God (vs 14). To prove the point, the apostle quotes the words God spoke to Moses (in Ex 33): "*I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion*" (vs 15). The credit for salvation does not belong to the saved; it belongs rather to the "*God who shows mercy*" (vs 16). That all is geared to God's glory (Paul continues) is pointed up in what Scripture says concerning Pharaoh: "*For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'Even for this same purpose I have raised you up, that I might show My power in you, and that My name might be declared in all the earth'*" (vs 17). Through Pharaoh hardening his heart so stubbornly that it wasn't broken until ten plagues had devastated Egypt, God's name was praised the more. The lesson of Scripture, says Paul, is then this: Sovereignly, God "*has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens*" (vs 18). The point is this: God is God, and so may do with guilty sinners what He wills.

Romans 9:14 expresses our very own question of whether or not election and reprobation is fair. We ask, "Isn't God unfair in taking one and leaving the other?" "*What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not!*" Why not? Verses 20 and 21 remind us to think about **Whose** ways and counsel we are questioning and challenging. " ... *O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, 'Why have you made me like this?' Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honour and another for dishonour?*" Were God and man equal, man might be in a position to challenge God. But if God is **God**, and I a mere creature (sinful too yet!), then it is not for me to challenge God. I am to know my place in relation to God. It will not do for me to complain that God chose me but not another. It was I who protested against God in Paradise; it was I who broke the bond with God; it was I who rejected God. Yet **I** (!) am saved by God! Hence the only appropriate action on my part is to cover my mouth with my hand and to admit that all I deserve is damnation. It simply is not fitting for me to challenge why God saves the one and not the other. The attitude of Job after God displayed to him His majesty is so appropriate: "Job answered the Lord and said: 'Behold, I am vile; What shall I answer You? I lay my hand on my mouth...' (Job 40:3f).

The grounds for God's choosing the one and passing the other by cannot be attributed to works on man's part. Romans 9:11 states this in the context of explaining why God loved Jacob and not Esau: "*...for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, **not of works** but of Him who calls.*" God's grounds are simply His good pleasure. "*... He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to himself, **according to the good pleasure of His will**, to the praise of the glory of His grace ...*" (Ephesians 2:5,6). One is elect and the other is not simply because **God wanted it so**. I will never understand why God chose me and not my neighbour. However, the fact that God did choose me leads me to a deep sense of humility and gratitude. For what am I, that I should receive such grace?! Yet God was pleased to make me, a mortal sinner, His child. Surely it will take us an eternity to give to God the honour He is due on account of such saving work!

ARMINIANISM

The whole notion of where God and man stand in relation to each other is central to the doctrine of election. This is highlighted by the errors of Arminian theology, which forms the background to the defence of the faith as found in the Canons of Dort.

Arminian theology says that man is not dead, but rather is sick. However, to say that man is sick is to elevate man and demote God; it amounts to shrinking the distance between God and man. To suggest that man is not dead but only sick is to challenge God and negates what Scripture teaches concerning election.

If I am only sick (not totally depraved), I can have an input in the matter of whether or not I am saved. Hence Arminius said that election is conditional; God's decision to elect me is conditional on whether or not I choose to believe. God, Arminius taught, saw before hand that I would believe, and so He chose me - knowing that I would eventually come to faith. Christ's death, he continued, was not meant for a fixed number of persons only. Since the individual can choose whether or not he will believe, God intended

Christ's death for anybody and everybody - all who would choose to believe: universal atonement. Again, since a person can choose whether or not he will believe in Christ (and so be saved), he can also choose to refuse God's gift of salvation. Then God can plead with the sinner to take hold of God's offer, but God may be disappointed for the decision is up to man. Grace, then, is resistible, for I can choose to refuse God's offer. Once more, the believer can decide after many years to reject God's offer of the gospel, and fall away from the truth; the saint does not necessarily persevere.

Arminianism gives to man the credit for salvation. God has to wait for man to grab hold of what He offers. It is even possible, Arminius taught, that no man wishes to receive what God gives and that heaven will be empty on the last day. Arminianism has shrunk the distance between God and man so that the population of the New Jerusalem depends ultimately on man's decision to accept God's offer of salvation. This is distinctly contrary to Scripture. At the heart of Reformed thinking is the conviction that God is **God** and I but a sinful creature, and so I am completely *dependent* on the grace of sovereign God. It all comes down to *who I think God is* and *who I think man is*.

THE COMFORT OF ELECTION

What comfort do we receive in the doctrine of election? Timothy and Paul both know what it is to suffer on account of the Gospel. Read 2 Timothy 1:3-10. Life was far from easy for them. Yet Paul encourages Timothy with these words, "... *share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God, who has saved us and **called us with a holy calling**, not according to our works, but **according to His own purpose and grace** which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began.*" It is of election that Paul reminds Timothy here, the comfort being that if **God** calls, there is absolutely no one who can tear God's own away from Him. Despite the ire and rage of Satan and hell on account of God's work of election, God **will** bring to completion the work which He began by choosing and calling some to Himself. Satan cannot take anyone away from God (see also John 10:27,28).

Romans 8:28-39 also points out the comfort believers may experience in the knowledge of election. The verses 28-30 relate the fact of election, "*And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are **the called according to His purpose**. For **whom He foreknew, He also predestined** to be conformed to the image of His Son, ... Moreover **whom He predestined, these He also called**; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.*" What is the comfort in this? This is the comfort, says Paul: "*If **God** is **for us**, who can be against us? ... Who shall bring a charge against God's **elect**? It is God who justifies*" (vs 31, 33). If **God** chose me, who can then accuse and condemn me?? No one, for God has justified me, declared me not guilty before Him. No one can separate me from the love of God. No one can pull me away from the God who loved me, called me and chose me to be taken from Satan's side to be with Him again forever. No matter what may happen in this life, says God through Paul, **NOTHING** can separate me from His love. "*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?*" No, writes Paul, for God Himself has foretold that these various troubles would occur. Paul quotes from Psalm 44 to prove the point: "*As it is written, "For your sake we are killed all day long: We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter"*" (vs 35,36). But in spite of how things may look at times, the assurance of all believers may be that "*Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord*" (vs 37-39).

If salvation were to depend on me, what certainty would I have of being saved when I get caught up in the storms of life, when my faith is not so strong? God's election however gives me this comfort that God is ever faithful and hence I am always safe in His hands. It is not for nothing that Paul, after he wrote in verse 30 that those who were predestined were also called and justified, continues to write in the *past tense* concerning the glorification of the elect. "... *whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also **glorified**.*" The elect will not be glorified until Christ shall return on His day. Nevertheless, this event is established so firmly in election, it is so certain for the elect, that the believer can rest assured that it is as good as his today already. Hence Paul can speak of glorification as a present reality; he uses the past tense.

Should it then come to pass that I might stray from God at any time in my life, if God has called me, He **will** hold on to me. David too once went astray and refused to acknowledge his sin before God. Consequently he felt so alone, and so distant from God (see Psalm 32). Yet God was there all along, and He caused David to feel His heavy hand upon him in order that He might repent and once again live as God's child in restored communion with Him. Once God is there in the life of His elect, He is always there. This is something I may believe at all times, even though I may not always experience it as such. At times it may feel as though God is so very far away. But here, too, it is ultimately a matter of *what I think about God*. Who do I believe God to be? If **God** saved me, and I am His, am I to think that He will change His mind? No, for God does not change. God certainly knew when He chose me that I was a miserable wretch. Yet He chose me. I may at times feel alone; yet I may know myself to be safe with this God.

THE CERTAINTY OF ONE'S ELECTION

How do I know if I am among the elect? Those whom God has elected, those whom He has chosen and brought back to His side, were totally dead in sin when they were with Satan. God justified the elect while they were still in this state of death. Yet, though the elect were dead, God when He saved them in Christ also raised them to a new life (see Article 24). *"Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love"* (Ephesians 1:4). The elect were chosen in order that they might be renewed, made holy. This renewal is evidenced by the presence of faith in the elect, presence of the fruits of the Spirit. This faith is not worked by the Lord in those persons who are still on Satan's side and doomed to hell. God only works this faith in the elect. Therefore Jesus could say in Matthew 7:16-20, *"You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ... Therefore by their fruits you will know them."* Hence, to know if I am among God's elect, I must ask myself: do I see evidence of regeneration in my life? Do I see fruits of faith? Do I see in myself evidence of being united in Christ? Do I have a love for righteousness, a hatred for evil, a sorrow for sin? Do I delight in doing God's will? If I can answer these questions in the affirmative, then I have evidence of God working in me by His Holy Spirit, and hence I have evidence of being elect. For God does not work these evidences of election in the hearts of those destined for hell.

The Heidelberg Catechism asks in Lord's Day 32, *"Why must we yet do good works?"* The answer is this: *"... that we ourselves may be assured of our faith by its fruits ..."* This is stated even more strongly by the Canons of Dort in ch. 1 article 12. *"The elect in due time, though in various stages and in different measure, are made certain of this their eternal and unchangeable election to salvation ... by observing in themselves, with spiritual joy and holy delight, the unfailing fruits of election pointed out in the Word of God - such as a true faith in Christ, a childlike fear of God, a godly sorrow for their sins, and a hungering and thirsting after righteousness."* See also Canons of Dort, chapter 5, article 12. *"Scripture meanwhile testifies that believers in this life have to struggle with various doubts of the flesh and, placed under severe temptation, do not always feel this full assurance of faith and certainty of persevering. But God, the Father of all comfort, will ...by the Holy Spirit again revive in them the certainty of persevering"* (Canons of Dort, ch. 5, article 11). What God has started He will also continue.

THE FRUIT OF ELECTION

Possibly the Canons of Dort themselves put into words most aptly what the fruit of election is. Chapter 1, Article 13, reads as follows:

"The awareness and assurance of this election provide the children of God with greater reason for daily humbling themselves before God, for adoring the depth of His mercies, for cleansing themselves, and for fervently loving Him in turn who first so greatly loved them."

ARTICLE 17

THE RESCUE OF FALLEN MAN

MAN'S NEED FOR REDEMPTION

Article 17 concerns itself with man's redemption, with God's actions towards man after he had fallen into sin. To make clear what man had to be rescued from, deBres first describes man's sin and misery, and how desperately man needed to be rescued. DeBres describes this sin and misery with these words, "*man had thus plunged himself into physical and spiritual death and made himself completely miserable ...*" Man was as good as physically dead in that, though he was still capable of breathing, the grave was his destiny. Man was spiritually dead in that he had alienated himself from God - though he had been created to live close to God. Man was dead, fully dead, and the dead are not capable of reaching out or crying out for help; the dead can't do a thing. See further Article 14, page 62.

Worse still, man did not just find himself in a state of physical and spiritual death; no, says deBres, "*man **plunged himself** into physical and spiritual death and **made himself** completely miserable...*" It is our own fault. We plunged ourselves into this situation. We made ourselves repulsive to God, bankrupt, with nothing at all to offer God. As if that weren't already bad enough, we (in Adam) then "*trembling fled from (God).*" Man didn't want God; we didn't want God's mercy. DeBres' description of man is far from attractive. Yet this realistic portrait of man is so essential to our understanding and appreciation of redemption. Hence deBres commences this article on redemption with a statement repeating man's sin and misery.

In the awareness of our sin and misery, the Gospel message is all the more surprising. It was no secret to God who we were. God certainly knew man to be dead, miserable, repulsive and yet He -of all things!- sought us out to see what we were doing; God looked for us to save us. "*And (Adam and Eve) heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and **Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God** among the trees of the garden. Then **the LORD God called to Adam** and said to him, "Where are you?"*" (Genesis 3:8,9). Though Adam and Eve had joined Satan's side and were hiding from God, God yet sought them and called out to them! God's act of seeking out our parents in Paradise constitutes a most surprising act!

GOD'S MOTIVATION FOR REDEEMING MANKIND

What motivated this God, my God, to seek out such wretches? Why did God call out to us in the face of our fleeing? Says article 17, "*... our **gracious** God in His marvellous wisdom and goodness set out to seek man when he trembling fled from Him.*" Scripture speaks graphically of God's graciousness. In Luke 1:78, for example, the Scriptures describe God as moved to the pit of His stomach on account of the plight of the human race. Zachariah speaks of "*the remission of their sins through the **tender mercy** of our God.*" In Greek, the words translated as 'tender mercy' literally mean "bowels of mercy". The Lord is presented as having no appetite on account of the misery into which we had plunged ourselves. So moved was God by that misery that He sent His Son into the world for the remission of our sins.

Article 17 speaks of God's *wisdom* and *goodness* with regard to God setting out to seek man. See Art 1b, page 36 and 41, for the meaning of these terms.

PROTEVANGEL: GENESIS 3:15

In Genesis 3:15 we read God's words as spoken to the serpent, Satan, whose side man had joined. "*And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.*" God would put a strain on the bond that had been forged between Satan and the fallen human race. Though Satan would be successful in bruising Christ's heel (ie, Christ would die on the cross), God would ensure that in the process Satan's head would be bruised. Contained in these words is the whole gospel in a nutshell. (Genesis 3:15 is often referred to as 'the Mother Promise.' This is a literal translation of the Dutch term 'Moeder Belofte' for which 'protevangel' is the common

English term; 'prot' means first, and 'evangel' means 'Gospel'). In this First Gospel God told fallen man what He was going to do to deliver him from his misery.

The rich revelation captured in Art 17 points up again who my God is. This God does not change, ever. When Adam so long ago ran to hide from God, deserted God, God yet sought him out. Likewise, God, moved to the pit of His stomach at my plight, seeks me out. To me He said, "You are My child; I have given Christ to make payment for your sins." In the midst of the struggles of my daily life, I am much comforted by the awareness that God loved me so much that He Himself sought me out in order to save me. God Himself has declared me precious in His divine eyes. Such a thought is humbling and at the same time so exceedingly rich. This awareness of God's grace gives each of us the encouragement we need in the face of life's struggles.

THE COVENANT

1) The covenant is one-sided in its origin.

God's act of seeking was and is done in the context of the covenant. The Covenant is a relation of love from God to man whereby God binds man to Himself (in Christ). In Genesis 17:7 we read, "*And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you.*" Here we read that **God** makes His covenant; it is God imposing the covenant upon man. It was with these words that God addressed Abraham, thereby imposing the covenant on him. God did not ask Abraham for his permission to do so, but simply decreed that He would do so.

2) The content of the covenant.

In Genesis 17:7 we read, "*to be God to you and your descendants after you.*" God states 'I am going to be your God.' With these words God returns to the situation of Genesis 1. When God made man in the image of God, He made man to be His, the Father's children. In so doing, God established a father/child relationship. That father/child relation involved the notion of tender care, as was also demonstrated by the abundance of the Garden of Eden into which God placed man in the beginning. Adam and Eve in Paradise were fully safe in the hands of their almighty, loving covenant Father.

That God sought out fallen man, and established with him again His covenant, makes fallen man so exceedingly rich: **God** will again be **our** God! When God re-established His covenant with Israel (after the exodus from Egypt), God said, "*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage*" (Exodus 20:2). No matter how much Israel resisted, God bound Himself to Israel, bound Israel to Himself; God imposed a relation of love between this people and Himself; 'I am your God, you are My people; I care for you.' Israel's unworthiness to be included in the covenant was pointed up by their identity as a nation of slaves. Yet God was sovereignly, mercifully pleased to be God for this sinful people, to restore with them the relation of the beginning.

3) The covenant is two-sided in its existence.

Once the covenant is there, imposed and established by God, then God **and** the people with whom He made the covenant are to keep it going. The continuation of the covenant is dependent upon both parties of the covenant honouring their respective commitments to the promises and obligations upon which the covenant has been founded. God was obligated to continue to be Israel's God because He had promised at Mt Sinai to be their God, and Israel was permitted to appeal to God to remember and fulfil this promise to them. Likewise, Israel was obligated to act as God's people, which they would demonstrate by obedience to God's ten commandments (see Exodus 20: 3-17). God could therefore appeal to Israel to remember and fulfil their promise to Him. Said Moses in his farewell sermon to Israel, "*This day the LORD your God commands you to observe these statutes and judgments; therefore you shall be careful to observe them with all your heart and with all your soul. Today you have proclaimed the LORD to be your God, and that you will walk in his ways and keep his statutes, his commandments, and his judgments, and that you will obey his voice. Also today the LORD has proclaimed you to be his special people, just as he has*

promised you, that you should keep all his commandments (Deuteronomy 26:16-18). Here we read of two parties each making a proclamation to the other. In response to God's proclamation that Israel was His special people, Israel made a profession of faith, professing that the Lord who proclaimed them to be His special people was their God, and that this obligated them to do His will. Both God and Israel were to be faithful to their covenant promises. Here we see two sides in the covenant, and hence promises and obligations to be honoured from two sides.

4) God's Covenant commenced in Paradise

The word 'covenant' does not appear in Genesis 1 & 2. Nevertheless, given what the Scriptures later reveal about what God's covenant is, we understand that the covenant was already in existence in Paradise. That is: when God made man in the beginning, God treated man differently than He treated the monkeys and the mountains. For He placed a bond between Himself and man - as is pointed up in the notion of 'image of God' (see Article 14, page 61). This is God's covenant with us. It's because the covenant existed in Paradise already that the fall into sin was so very tragic, for the fall was man's act of breaking the covenant. Man's covenant breaking, which landed him on Satan's side, was deserving of God's wrath. Yet what did God do? Though man broke the covenant, God did not break His promise in the covenant! God kept the promise He made in the covenant; God remained faithful to His side of the covenant. God maintained what He had promised, namely, that 'you are My people.' Hence God sought us out, and came to us with Christ who would take upon Himself the curse we had brought upon ourselves (Genesis 3:15: protevangel). God re-established the covenant with us, promised to be our God still, promised to give a Saviour who would carry the burden of God's covenant wrath, and so reconcile us to God. On the last day the full wealth of the covenant will be apparent for us to see, for we read in Revelation 21:3 these words: "*And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and **they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.**'"* Here Jesus Christ uses covenant language, terms found in passages as Genesis 17:7; Exodus 20:2; Deuteronomy 26:16,17.

5) Only ONE Covenant

After man's fall into sin God re-established His covenant with mankind. This covenant was not a new covenant, but a continuation of the very same covenant of Genesis 1 & 2, with the added dimension of Christ. Though we read in Scripture of God establishing covenants with Noah (Gen 9:9), Abraham (Gen 17:7), Israel (Ex 20:2), these were not new, different or separate covenants, but re-establishments or affirmations of God's original covenant with Adam in Paradise. Each time God renewed His covenant the bud of the covenant opened a little more - until, finally, in the New Covenant established in Jesus Christ the full flower of God's mercy and love became apparent (see Hebrew 8). Always His one covenant stood, as God moved history along till the time of Christ's arrival.

Though we can speak of different stages or time periods in the history of the covenant, it was, and is, always one and the same covenant. Therefore we cannot say that Christ un-did the covenant, or negated the obligations of the covenant; rather, Christ fulfilled and perpetuated the covenant. God's covenant can be seen as a continuum, where God has this relation of love with people through the ages. Granted, in the days of Adam and Noah God made His covenant with *all* those who lived at the time, while His covenant with Abraham was limited to Abraham and his seed. Nevertheless, despite differences in the various administrations of the covenant, God's covenant is essentially one. Hence we cannot *contrast* our days (in the New Testament era) on the time line of covenant history with, for example, the days of the Old Testament which were characterised by the ceremonial laws. Though we live in a different era, we, as well as God's people of the Old Testament, are members of the one covenant. Always the one condition applies in the covenant, namely, God imposes His relation of love on His people, and we in turn are to express faith in God through obedience to Him. This was true for the people in Abraham's days and it is true for us today.

ARTICLE 18

THE INCARNATION OF THE SON OF GOD

AT GOD'S APPOINTED TIME

Article 17 confesses how God came to seek out fallen man, came with the Gospel of the promise of the seed of the woman who would bruise the head of Satan (Genesis 3:15). Article 18 continues this confession by stating that the seed of the woman was sent by God at a very specific point in time. Says our article, "... **at the time appointed by Him**, (God) *sent His one and only eternal Son into the world.*" God, at the time of His choosing, sovereignly acted to fulfil the promise of Genesis 3:15. This is based on what Scripture says in Galatians 4:3-5, namely, "... *we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world. **But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth his Son**, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law...*" Here 'bondage' is a reference to man being on Satan's side after the fall into sin. It was when God determined the time to be right, that He sent His only Son for our redemption.

GOD GAVE UP HIS SON FOR US / CHRIST GAVE UP HIS GLORY FOR US

Christ is God's only Son. At Christ's baptism God said concerning His Son, "**You are my beloved Son; in you I am well pleased**" (Luke 3:22). Not only was the Son of God dearly loved by His Father; He was also with the Father in glory from all eternity. Said Jesus in His prayer to the Father, "*And now, O Father, glorify me together with yourself, **with the glory which I had with you before the world was***" (John 17:5). When God, "at the appointed time", set about to fulfil the promise of the protevangel, God sent His only beloved Son out of His glorious presence, sent His dear Son to earth. Scripture speaks both of God giving and God sending His Son. In John 3:16 we read, "*For God so loved the world that he **gave** his only begotten Son...*" and in John 5:24 we read Jesus saying, "*Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes in him who **sent** me has everlasting life ...*"

We get so accustomed to Christmas. Yet we do well to stop and consider why Christmas was necessary, consider too what self-sacrifice was involved on the part of the Father and the Son. God, who loved His only Son so much, instructed Him to go and the Son willingly went. Yes, we get so used to Christmas, but there is no marvel greater than that day. For take note of the self-emptying love on the part of the Father Who gave up and sent His only beloved Son, and take note too of the self-emptying love on the part of the Son Who gave up His glory in Heaven to come to earth.

In itself, there was nothing dishonourable about the Son becoming man, for man was created in the image of God. Consider though the humility of becoming one of us: *fallen* man. Paul called this humiliation. Said he in Philippians 2:5-8, "...*Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, he **humbled** himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.*" One could find no better example of self denial than for the Son to leave His heavenly glory to join fallen man and die on the cross for their sake. God gave **everything**, even His own Son; and the Son willingly went. This is a gospel that cannot leave one cold. That in the crib of Bethlehem should lie the Son of God.... Words cannot capture the depth of that marvel! (See here further Packer, *Knowing God*, Chapter 5, entitled "God Incarnate".)

Why did the Son come to earth? He came for the benefit of lost sinners. "*And (Mary) will bring forth a son, and you shall call his name JESUS, for he will save his people **from their sins**,*" said the angel to Joseph (Matthew 1:21). "*For the Son of Man has come to seek and to **save** that which was **lost**,*" said Jesus to Zacchaeus (Luke 19:10). The Nicene Creed, after having described Who the Lord Jesus Christ is, goes on to state why it was that He came down to earth: "*Who, **for us men and our salvation**, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man*" (Book of Praise, p. 437). **I** had deserted God, joined Satan, broken the covenant with God. Yet God did not leave me in my predicament, but sent His only Son to earth **to save me**. God, who does not change, did in Bethlehem what He had promised to do so many years prior in Genesis 3. To me, in my particular

circumstances and with my particular strengths and weaknesses, He has given Christ so that I might be brought back from Satan's side to God's side. It is this knowledge which makes Christmas so rich for me. This Gospel I may carry with me in all the highs and lows of life. If that is how much God loves me, then all is well.

ANABAPTIST HERESY CONCERNING CHRIST'S INCARNATION

DeBres had to defend the incarnation of Christ over against the heresy of the Anabaptists. The Anabaptists did not deny that Christ was born of Mary, but they compared Mary to a funnel, in that Christ merely passed through her and hence did not take on human nature. According to the Anabaptists Christ was not true man but only true God. Yet deBres argued in agreement with Scripture that it was imperative for Christ to be true man in order to be able to save man. The curse had fallen upon man, and therefore the curse had to be paid by man. Christ, true God and true man, was the only man able to pay for sin (Lord's Day 6).

ARTICLE 19

THE TWO NATURES IN THE ONE PERSON OF CHRIST

Guido deBres wrote the Belgic Confession in a context of great struggle. DeBres worked in the midst of persecution by the Roman Catholic government and was consequently forced to work 'underground', was imprisoned by the authorities, and beheaded on account of his faith. In the midst of his struggles, deBres wrote the Confession, wrote also article 19 concerning the divine and human natures of Christ. One may well question deBres' doing so. Of what relevance was the issue of Christ's two natures to the tensions experienced by deBres in his day? Is the topic of the two natures of Christ not strictly academic and irrelevant to the daily struggles of the believer??

As a minister, it was deBres' responsibility to instruct his congregation in the truths of Scripture; the truths of God's revelation. This revelation of God included Christ's incarnation, the doctrine that God the Son became man, was born as a baby in Bethlehem. That Christ became man was not denied or disputed in deBres' day. What was disputed though, was the *relationship*, the interaction between the divine and human natures of Christ. **How** was Jesus true God and true man simultaneously? It was this that deBres sought to defend in article 19. It was his conviction that the truth of God's word had to be laid before the people, and be rightly confessed - even though the subject might at first reading appear so theoretical and difficult.

SCRIPTURE CONCERNING THE TWO NATURES OF CHRIST

1. Jesus is True God

With Article 10, evidence was mentioned from Scripture that Jesus was indeed true God. This evidence need not be repeated here.

2. Jesus is True Man

In the course of history, Christ's human nature has not been seriously challenged. Not only is it logical that Jesus of Nazareth was truly human; it is also Scripturally accurate. The picture given to us by the authors of the gospels is distinctly one of Jesus being true man. He was born in Bethlehem as oldest child of Mary. His genealogy records the names of His ancestors (see Matthew 1 and Luke 3). He grew up in Nazareth, as others grow up elsewhere. As other children, He grew in wisdom and in stature (Luke 2:52).

Jesus knew from experience what exhaustion was (Mark 4:38), what hunger was (Matthew 4:2), what thirst was (John 4:7). He could be happy, He could also be angry and grieved (Mark 3:5). When Lazarus lay in the tomb, He wept (John 11:35).

Well has the church confessed in the Athanasian Creed that Jesus was not only "perfect God", but also "perfect man".

HERESIES CONCERNING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE TWO NATURES OF CHRIST

After the adoption of the Nicene Creed in the fourth century, much discussion arose in the church concerning how Jesus was both God and man.

1. Eutyches

Eutyches (c. 378-454) stressed the one nature of Christ: a combination of two elements which formed something new. His position may be compared to the result one gets when you mix cold water with hot; the result is neither cold nor hot but somewhere in between. In Jesus (he said) the divine and human natures were combined in such a way that the human nature took on characteristics of the divine nature, and the divine nature took on the characteristics of the human. Jesus, then, was neither true God as God is

true God, nor was He true man as man is true man. Rather, Jesus was a 'mixture' of God + man = 'Godman'.

2. Nestorius

Over against Eutychus, Nestorius (he became bishop of Constantinople in 428) taught the division of Christ's two natures. According to Nestorius, the person of Jesus was (as it were) made up of two distinct persons, the one being human and the other divine. His position may be compared to oil and water in the one container. Just as oil and water do not mix, the oil floating on the water remaining distinctly oil and the water underneath the oil remaining distinctly water, so (he said) God and man do not mix. The Son of God, he said, came to live in the man Jesus as in a temple. So Jesus was made up of two separate persons: God and man.

After a period of much struggle and confusion, these two positions were refuted by the church in the Council of Chalcedon (451). This Council formulated a new creed that strengthened the contents of the Nicene Creed, stressing that Jesus Christ, one Person, was both true God and true man: unmixed, unchanged, undivided, unseparable.

3. Martin Luther

During the Great Reformation in the 16th century, Martin Luther picked up on what Eutychus taught. Luther taught that Jesus' divine nature pervaded His human nature, so that the characteristics of His divine nature extended also to His human nature. It is characteristic of divinity to be everywhere present. So, Luther said, Jesus' human nature has taken on board this divine characteristic of omnipresence. So Jesus' body is everywhere present.

This understanding on Luther's part had repercussions on his teaching concerning the bread of the Lord's Supper. If Jesus' human nature is omnipresent, then Jesus is also bodily present in the bread. Luther referred to Luke 22:19, where we read that Jesus, at His institution of the Lord's Supper, said to His disciples concerning the bread: "... *This is my body...*" In deBres' community of Doornik, this teaching of Luther's was known.

How we receive the bread of the Lord's Supper is dependent upon our view on the relationship between the two natures of Christ. Hence deBres saw it as his duty to explain to his congregation what God had revealed concerning this. Said deBres, "*We believe that by this conception the person of the Son of God is inseparably united and joined with the human nature, so that there are not two sons of God, nor two persons, but two natures united in one single person. Each nature retains its own distinct properties.... However, these two natures are so closely united in one person that they were not even separated by His death.*" No, deBres does not provide us with an explanation as to how the one Person of Christ has two natures simultaneously. Yet he clearly implied the error of Luther's teaching in stating, "*Each nature retains its own distinct properties.*"

Scripture tells us that Jesus is true God and true man. How Jesus is true God and true man at once we cannot understand. Here again we are confronted with the limitations of the human mind. Here again we are called to humbly acknowledge that we are only human, and so we cannot understand our God. In faith we must believe what God has revealed to us.

THE TWO NATURES OF CHRIST CRUCIAL FOR MAN'S SALVATION

DeBres concludes this article with a statement as to the importance of confessing the two natures of Christ. "*For this reason we profess Him to be true God and true man: true God in order to conquer death by His power; and true man that He might die for us according to the infirmity of His flesh.*" As we confess in Lord's Day 6, to deny that Christ is true God or that He is true man, or to maintain that He is half God and half man ('Godman'), is to undermine salvation itself. Lord's Day 5 (Question & Answer 15, see the prooftexts mentioned there) echoed the teaching of Scripture that the only mediator capable of delivering man from God's eternal punishment was one who was a true and righteous man and at the same

time true God. Lord's Day 6 then goes on to explain why such a deliverer is necessary. God's justice required that the same human nature which sinned should also pay for sin - the Saviour had to be a real man. At the same time, since God's wrath against sin was greater than any human could bear, the Saviour also had to be true God. Had Christ not possessed the two natures of divinity and humanity in His one person, I would be without salvation.

Was it necessary for deBres, in a time of persecution and unrest, to defend the doctrine of the two natures in the one person of Christ? Given what was at stake, it certainly was necessary - despite the circumstances. It remains necessary today too to stay close to all that God has revealed in His Word, His Gospel of salvation for sinners.

ARTICLE 20

THE JUSTICE AND MERCY OF GOD IN CHRIST

SALVATION IS GOD'S WORK

Having confessed in Article 19 what the Scriptures teach concerning the person of Christ, deBres now moves on to make confession of the work of Christ. To do so, though, deBres begins with confessing **God's** work. "*We believe that **God... sent His Son to assume that nature in which disobedience had been committed ...***" Here the accent is on God. Salvation did not begin with man, nor did it begin with the Son offering Himself to the Father. "*...**God** so loved the world that **He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life*** (John 3:16). And: "*the Father has sent Me*" (John 5:36). Salvation begins with God.

God had created man to be His people, but man fell into sin, broke the bond between God and himself, and instead bound himself to Satan and became "*dead in trespasses and sin*" (Ephesians 2:1). Since man was in a state of death, it was impossible for us to call out to God for help and salvation. When deBres confesses that salvation commenced with God, he builds on the material confessed in Article 14: with our fall into sin we became *dead*. It was God who sought us in Genesis 3; it was God who acted (see also Article 17).

GOD'S JUSTICE AND GOD'S MERCY (Not God's justice versus God's mercy)

In the first sentence of this article, God is described as "*perfectly merciful*." We accept such a description quite readily, for it certainly is mercy that God sent His Son to bring sinners from Satan's side back to His side. We don't accept as readily that God is "*perfectly just*". It does not strike us as justice that God sends His Son to pay for our sin. We wonder: wouldn't it rather have been justice on God's part to say to fallen man, 'your plight is your own fault, now suffer the consequences?' Scripture, though, does not speak in these terms, and it is on the basis of Scripture that deBres confesses that it was both God's justice and His mercy which caused Him to send His Son.

God demonstrated both His mercy and His justice in that He sent His Son for the benefit of the lost. To use the words of deBres, "*God therefore manifested His justice against His Son when He laid our iniquity on Him*." What I the sinner deserved, God poured onto Christ. God did not leave sin unpunished; He is too just for that. In the words of Lord's Day 4, Q & A 11: "*His justice requires that sin committed against the most high majesty of God also be punished with the most severe, that is, with everlasting, punishment of body and soul*." So God poured out His wrath, insisted on payment: justice.

At the same time God was so very merciful. For the wrath we deserved was poured out *on Another* so that we might go free. This is mercy, that those "who were guilty and worthy of damnation" should receive goodness, forgiveness. Christ was sent to the cross to bear the wrath of God against my sin, and the result is that my sins are paid for; God is angry with me no longer! Christ stood **in the place of** the sinner, bore the wrath of God for us so that the sinner is set free: that is God's mercy.

The one characteristic of God cannot be played off against the other. It is incorrect to say that God's love cancels out His wrath or that God's justice cancels out His mercy. Both God's justice and His mercy need to receive full attention. It is because God is just that His wrath had to be poured out, and it is because God is merciful that His wrath was not poured out on all sinners, but on Christ *in place of* sinners. It is the two together that point up Who my God really is.

The God of the Old Testament is often understood as the God of anger, whereas the God of the New Testament is perceived as the God of love. This is incorrect. God demonstrated His justice and His mercy equally in Genesis 3 when He sent man out of Paradise (justice) and at the same time come with the protevangel (mercy). Equally, God in the NT displayed His mercy to us by sending Christ to earth (Luke 2) and His justice by sending Christ to the cross (Luke 23). In His mercy God is just and in His justice God is merciful.

ARTICLE 21

THE SATISFACTION OF CHRIST OUR HIGH PRIEST

CHRIST: HIGH PRIEST ACCORDING TO THE ORDER OF MELCHIZEDEK

Article 21 begins with a reference to Christ being a High Priest "after the order of Melchizedek." The concept "order of Melchizedek" comes from Hebrews 7 (and Psalm 110; see also Genesis 14:18ff). The author of Hebrews echoes God's revelation in Genesis 14 concerning Melchizedek, that he was "*king of Salem, priest of the most high God.*" This man who was both king and priest was "*without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, remains a priest continually*" (Hebrews 7:1-3).

In stark contrast to the priests of Israel, we do not read of a genealogy of Melchizedek, nor a record of his birth or death. In Israel, Aaron and his sons were appointed to priesthood by God (Numbers 17 & 18). Aaron was appointed by God as High Priest, and his oldest son would succeed his father as High Priest through the generations. Not just anybody could become priests, then; to become a priest, one had to be from the tribe of Levi, and then specifically from the family of Aaron. The reverse was also true: all the sons of Aaron had to become priests.

Jesus of Nazareth was not of the family of Aaron, let alone of the tribe of Levi. He could, then, not be a priest. Yet God ordained Him as priest forever, not after the 'order of Aaron' (ie, with genealogical credentials befitting the priesthood), but after the order of Melchizedek (ie, without genealogical credentials). It is because God ordained Him as priest that Jesus could function as our Mediator on the cross of Calvary and is our Intercessor in heaven today.

SIN OFFERINGS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

In Leviticus 16 we read of God's stipulations for the annual Day of Atonement. On completion of the performance of the ritual of purifying the Most Holy Place, Aaron had to place both his hands on the head of a live goat, "*confess over it all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions, concerning all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat*" (vs 21). By so doing Aaron transferred the sins of the people to the goat. The goat, laden with the sins of the people of Israel, was then sent into the wilderness. In Scripture the wilderness is symbolic of the domain of Satan. The wilderness is a place in total contrast to the Garden of Eden: a Garden of Plenty versus a place of nothing. Hence it was not without significance that Jesus was driven into the wilderness by the Spirit, there to be tempted by the Devil (Matthew 4). Sending the sin-laden goat into the wilderness on the Day of Atonement was a symbolic casting into hell. Sin had to be removed; the goat being sent away was a symbolic removal of sin.

The notion of the transferral of sin from the sinner to another is also evident in the sacrifices the Israelites themselves had to bring on account of sin. When any person in Israel -be it the anointed priests or the whole congregation or the ruler or anyone of the common people- committed a sin unintentionally, or became aware of having sinned, the guilty person had to offer an unblemished young bull or male kid of the goats as a sin offering (Leviticus 4). He had to bring his sin offering to the priest, lay his hands on the head of the animal, and then kill it. God had decreed in Genesis 2 that death was the penalty of sin (vs 16; see also Romans 6:23). By rights, then, the sinner ought to die. But the animal was killed instead because the sin was transferred from the sinner to the animal. Here is pointed up the justice of God; sin must be punished, there must come death, the animal died. Here is pointed up also the mercy of God; God allowed the sinner to transfer his sin to the bull or the goat, and the animal died in the place of the sinner. Sin having been transferred, the animal became the sinner's substitute. Through His requirement of the sin offering, God taught His people Israel that they had to take sin seriously. Even one's unintentional sins required a sin offering. This would certainly have made one act or speak more consciously, lest in doing so he should sin - and have to collect an offering from the paddock and make the trip to the priest.

CHRIST: OUR SUBSTITUTIONARY LAMB

In Isaiah 53:4-6 we read how Christ became THE substitutionary sacrificial Lamb for sinners. Here the prophet Isaiah was moved by God to speak concerning the Man of sorrows (and from a NT perspective we understand this Man of Sorrows to be the Saviour Jesus Christ) these words, *"Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded **for our transgressions**, He was bruised **for our iniquities**; **The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed**. All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And **the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all**."*

God told Adam in Paradise (and so told all mankind) that death had to follow on sin. *"From every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat the fruit of it **you shall surely die**"* (Genesis 2:16, 17). Furthermore, in Romans 6:23 we read, *"For the wages of sin is **death** ..."* But Isaiah 53 speaks of a *transferral* of sin. Just as the Lord instructed the people of Israel to lay their sins on the goat, God likewise took my sins and laid them on Jesus. The coming Saviour is here portrayed as suffering in the place of the sinner, as the **Substitute**. This is what the angel said to Joseph in Matthew 1:21, *"And she (Mary) will bring forth a son, and you shall call his name **JESUS**, for He will save His people from their sins."* Jesus came to take away my sin -how?- by substituting Himself in my place.

The following texts are further evidence of Christ's substitutionary sacrifice, whereby my sins are imputed, transferred, to Christ and that I may thus benefit from what He achieved. Said Jesus concerning Himself, *"... the Son of Man (came) to give His life (as) a ransom **for many**"* (Matthew 20:28). At the institution of the Lord's Supper Jesus said to His disciples, *"For this is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed **for many for the remission of sins**"* (Matthew 26:28). To the Romans Paul wrote: *"For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died **for the ungodly**"* and *"God demonstrates His own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died **for us**"* (Romans 5: 6, 8). To the Corinthians too, Paul said, *"God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, **not imputing their trespasses to them**, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.... For **He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us**..."* (2 Corinthians 5: 18-20). In all the above texts, the operative word is the little word '**for**'. Christ's death on the cross was for us, in our place (substitute) and for our benefit. By His death on the cross Christ fulfilled the sin offerings required in the Old Testament.

The fact that Christ died *in my place* is certainly nothing I can be proud of, for it again points up how deeply I fell into sin and the extent of my depravity. I sinned, I had to pay for my sin, but I could not do so; I deserved to die. Yet through this depressing reality shines the richness of the gospel of salvation, that Christ died **FOR me**. That little word 'for' contains such incomparably rich gospel; though I deserve to suffer the infinite wrath of God forever, Christ died on the cross **in my place**. So there is no wrath from God for me; there is only grace, love and mercy. What a God, that He should prepare such good news for me!

SINNERS MAY REJOICE

What was Paul's response to such a Gospel? *"We ... **rejoice** in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation"* (Romans 5:11). A Gospel such as this cannot leave one untouched. I am no longer on the receiving end of God's anger!! Christ bore God's wrath, and so God's wrath is there for me no more! True, there are those times when I feel as though God is angry with me on account of my sins, perhaps when I'm confronted with the troubles of this life, or when I find it difficult to forget my sins of the past. Yet God lays before me the wonderful news that His only Son bore God's wrath **for me**, so that my sins are gone, I have been freed from them, freed from the wrath of holy God! DeBres confessed it this way: *"He presented Himself **in our place** before His Father, appeasing God's wrath by His full satisfaction."* Article 20 concluded with these words, *"Out of a most perfect love (God) gave His Son to die **for us** ..."* Yes, this little word 'for' captures the whole Gospel. Christ died on the cross when I should have. My sinful baggage of the past no longer matters, for Christ has done away with it *for me*. Though my conscience may still bother me, Scripture tells me that Christ has died **for me, in my place**. Focussing on this reality, I can only be thankful to God and moved to rejoice on account of such a rich Gospel, such Good News.

DeBres concluded Article 21 with these words, *"Therefore we justly say, with Paul, that we know nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. We count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus our Lord."* DeBres, in fear of his life, without a bed safe from his persecutors, without a house where he didn't have to be concerned about being found out, confesses the one thing that matters most in life: *"Christ and Him crucified"* (I Corinthians 2:2). Since deBres has received such riches from God, nothing else is important; house and family and peace and security is nothing in the light of *"the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord"* (Philippians 3:8). He is prepared to give up anything in his life for that which is most important: with his sins removed by Christ he enjoys reconciliation with the Creator. *"We find comfort in His wounds and have no need to seek or invent any other means of reconciliation with God than this only sacrifice, once offered, by which the believers are perfected for all times."* All that deBres is concerned about is Christ and His sacrifice of redemption for sinners.

That was deBres' confession in his situation. It is also my confession, in my situation.

ARTICLE 22

OUR JUSTIFICATION THROUGH FAITH IN CHRIST

"For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Our holy God is a just God. His justice demands that all sin must be punished by His wrath. This means that I, a sinner, deserve to have God's wrath poured out on me. As a sinner I deserve nothing but God's damnation. However, with the words of Article 21, I confess that God's justice was satisfied because Christ bore God's wrath against my sin on my behalf. At His death on the cross Christ was my substitute, receiving the full measure of God's wrath in my place. To use the words of the above text, Christ was made 'to be sin for me.' As a consequence, God's mercy could be poured out on me.

THE BENEFICIARIES OF CHRIST'S WORK

For whom did Christ die? Did He suffer the burden of God's wrath in place of all people? Said Christ in John 10:26-28, *"But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep, as I said to you. **My sheep** hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give **them** eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand."* From these words of Christ it is clear that only some people are His sheep and others are not. It is only to His sheep that Christ gives the gift of eternal life. It is only Christ's sheep that benefit from His work. Similarly, in vs 15 Jesus says: *"I lay down My life for **the sheep**."* Jesus doesn't die for those who are not His sheep, but only for those who are.

In John 17:9 Jesus says: "I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given Me." Christ divides mankind into two groups, and prays for one group only: "those whom You have given Me." It would be most bizarre for Jesus to decline to pray for the one group ("the world") and the next day on the cross give up His life for both groups ("the world" and "those whom You have given Me").

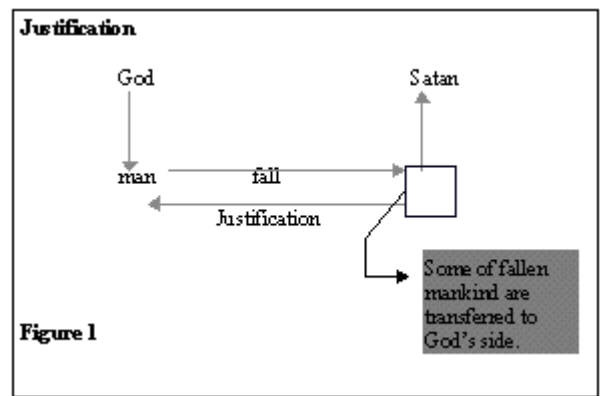
Christ's work is limited in its extent; not all people are saved. The term used to describe the limited extent of Christ's work is Limited Atonement (in contrast to 'Universal Atonement' as taught by the Remonstrants).

JUSTIFICATION

The term 'Justification' means literally "to make just" (from two Latin words meaning 'just' and 'make'). Justification is a judicial act of God, by which God declares a sinner just, righteous, innocent. The concept of 'justification' is illustrated by the vision Zechariah saw in Zechariah 3. *"Then he showed me Joshua the high priest (representative of the people) standing before the Angel of the LORD (the Angel is the Old Testament manifestation of Jesus, second person of the Trinity) and Satan (the word means 'accuser') standing at his right hand to oppose him. And the LORD said to Satan, 'The LORD rebuke you, Satan! The LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is this (Joshua the high priest) not a brand plucked from the fire?' Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments (symbolic of the sins that lay on him), and was standing before the Angel. Then He answered and spoke to those (the angels) who stood before Him, saying, 'Take away the filthy garments from him.' And to him (Joshua) He said, 'See, I have removed your iniquity from you, and I will clothe you with rich robes.' And I (Zechariah) said, 'Let them put a clean turban on his head.' So they put a clean turban on his head, and they put the clothes on him. And the Angel of the LORD stood by" (Zechariah 3:1-5).*

This vision illustrates what God's justification of the elect is about. Joshua the high priest, as representative of God's elect, appears before God the Judge. Satan is also present, accusing Joshua before God. However, the Lord does not follow up Satan's accusations. Instead, God makes a *declaration* that Joshua is innocent, just, righteous. God demands that Joshua be given a change of garments - forgiveness of sins. How is it possible for God to make such a statement? Weren't Satan's accusations correct? Yes, Satan was correct. But God declared the sinner innocent because of the work of the Angel of the Lord, the Christ (note that reference is made three times to the fact that Joshua was standing before the Angel of the

Lord). Joshua's innocence was an innocence *in Christ*. God had poured out onto Christ the wrath the sinner deserved. Since Christ was Joshua's substitute, Joshua was set free. Instead of God's wrath, Joshua received God's mercy. The basis for Joshua's justification certainly did not rest within himself. We read that he was dressed in filthy garments, sinful. No, the basis for this declaration of innocence was God's good pleasure in Christ. This declaration was an undeserved, free gift of God. Here is pointed up the marvel of the Gospel, that I, sinner that I am, should be declared righteous, without sin. What's more, I am declared righteous by none other than **holy God Himself**.



Graphically, justification describes the action of God whereby He takes His elect from Satan's side and brings him back to God's side. See Figure 1.

SCRIPTURAL EVIDENCE OF JUSTIFICATION

2 Corinthians 5:18-21:

"Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ ... God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them ... For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

We don't make ourselves presentable to God, but God does so through Jesus Christ. God made Christ our substitute, imputing our sins to Him so that we in turn could be declared righteous, innocent.

Romans 3:23-26

"... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."

Here the apostle Paul is adamant that **all** God's elect have sinned; **all** fall short of the glory of God; **not one of us** can appear in God's court in innocence; yet, all God's elect are justified. Here is a news most exciting to the lost sinner; God does the unexpected: He declares innocent the person who of Himself is guilty, very guilty. This is grace in all its glorious height!

RESULT OF JUSTIFICATION

"Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1).

If God says of me that I am innocent, then the sin which cost me Paradise is gone. It means that Paradise has been restored. 'Declared innocent' means that I may again have that relationship with God which used to be there in the beginning. In the above text, Paul was not necessarily describing the way he felt at the time. Rather, Paul made a statement of fact and we may echo his words, despite the way we might feel at any given time. The fact is that God has declared me just, innocent, meaning that He is angry with me no longer. Consequently, I may enjoy peace with God.

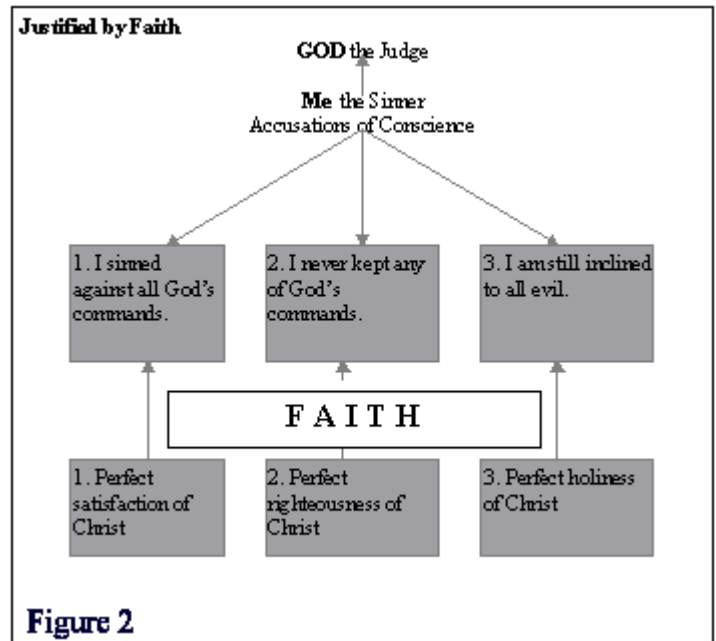
HOW GOD INVALIDATES SATAN'S ACCUSATIONS

Lord's Day 23, Q&A 60, asks, *"How are you righteous before God?"* One could also ask the question this way: how can I, a sinner, rightly be moved from Satan's side to God's side? In order to answer this

question, this Lord's Day describes what it is my conscience accuses me of:

- 1) *"I have grievously sinned against **all** God's commandments."* Not only have I sinned; I have sinned against **every last one** of God's laws.
- 2) *"I **have never kept any** (of God's commandments)."* This is certainly condemning, for not only have I sinned against God's commandments, but I can't even point to any instance at any time where I perfectly obeyed God's commands.
- 3) *"I **am still inclined to all evil.**"* My problem does not concern only what I did yesterday; tomorrow will be no better. I'm so extremely vulnerable to sin, so prone to sinning.

However, in order to answer the question as to how I am righteous before God, this Lord's Day goes on to describe what **God** does for me and to me, despite my condemnable record as His child. God knows exactly who it is that appears before Him. God knows that I sinned against all His commandments, yet He imputes to me the perfect satisfaction of Christ. God does not condemn me, but declares me innocent because Christ paid for my countless sins against all God's commands. Christ is present there while I stand before God. What Christ obtained for me God imputes to me. His payment for my sin is credited to me. My account, so black with sin, is made white again by Christ; He erased all my sins. (Figure 2, point 1).



God knows too that I never kept any of His commandments. God knows so well how unrighteous I am. Yet that did not stop God from declaring me righteous, innocent, for Christ's perfect righteousness covered my unrighteousness. Christ by His righteousness has obtained righteousness for me (Figure 2, point 2).

The extent and depth of the evil within me is not hidden from God either as I stand before Him. God is pleased to cover my continuing depravity with Christ's holiness. Christ's perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness, all of these, God imputes, grants, to me. Lord's Day 23 states, *"He grants these to me as if I had never had nor committed any sin, and as if I myself had accomplished all the obedience which Christ has rendered for me."* What Christ has obtained on the cross **is** for **me**. This is fact, reality, no matter how I might sometimes feel to the contrary.

RIGHTEOUS BY TRUE FAITH

What, now, is the bond that connects the merits of Christ to me the sinner? The bond that makes Christ's work mine is faith. Lord's Day 23 had asked how I was righteous before God, and gave this answer: *"**Only by true faith** in Jesus Christ.... God ... imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ ... if only I accept this gift with a **believing heart.**"* FAITH is the bond that unites Christ and me, the bond that makes Christ's merits mine, the instrument by which Christ's satisfaction, righteousness and holiness cover my debt, my unrighteousness, my unholiness. FAITH is the instrument by which Christ's merits become my own. This we read too in Romans 3:26 & 28. *"... that He might be just and the justifier of the one **who has faith** in Jesus.... Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by **faith** apart from the deeds of the law."*

Romans 3:28 has also been quoted in Article 22, *"Therefore we rightly say with Paul that we are justified by **faith alone**, or by faith apart from works of law."* It is worth noting here that in quoting this text, our

confession has one additional word to what we read in our Bible, namely, faith **alone**. Luther in his translation of the Bible (into German) added the word 'alone' in order to drive home, in the face of the heresies of the Great Reformation, the truth that one can be justified only by faith, without works of law.

FAITH: WHAT IS IT?

Is faith a feeling? No. Faith is an act of holding on to all that God says, all that God has promised, despite whether or not I feel that what He says is true or makes sense to me. Faith is this, that in spite of anything, I hold on to whatever it is that God says.

We read in Hebrews 11 of the faith of various Old Testament persons. "By faith Abel offered...." "By faith Noah...prepared an ark...." "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called..., and he went out, not knowing where he was going." Faith is presented here as more than knowledge about God. Faith is presented here as knowledge combined with trust, which together translates into action.

Lord's Day 7, Q & A 21, tells us that faith has two aspects. There we read, "*What is true faith? True faith is a sure knowledge whereby I accept as true all that God has revealed to us in His Word. At the same time it is a firm confidence that not only to others, but also to me, God has granted forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness, and salvation ...*" Hence there are two aspects to faith: a sure knowledge and a firm confidence.

One cannot separate these two elements of faith: knowledge and confidence. Therefore it is true too that one cannot separate faith from living. God's promises to me are forgiveness of sins and justification through the blood of Jesus Christ. Faith is that I know these promises, hold on to them and know these promises to be true for me in the midst of the sins I commit day by day, hour by hour. I know that I am a sinner, guilty according to God's holy Law, damnable. No matter where I am or what I am doing, my sins accuse me, pointing up my guilt before God. It is exactly because my sins and guilt are such a reality in my life, no matter what I do or where I am, that my faith must also be at work no matter what I do or where I am. I cannot say that I have faith, make profession of my faith, and then put my faith on the shelf while I get on with life. In the face of the trials of this life, compounded as they are by my own sinfulness, by faith I hold on to the promise of God that I share in all Christ's satisfaction, righteousness and holiness.

Central to faith is the good news of Jesus Christ. Yet that does not mean that faith circles only around the matter of forgiveness of sins. Christ's work means that God has become my Father, and means also that the Holy Spirit has been given to me. As I grapple with the concerns of daily living, I may believe that God is my Father Who cares for me well. By faith, then, I obey God's commands, by faith I trust that the way He leads me is good. Faith is not something that can be shelved. Faith is action, is holding on to God's promises in ALL my circumstances. So faith is far more than mere knowledge, something of the head. Faith is a disposition of the heart. Faith touches me, it occupies my mind and heart, it guides me in all I do.

Faith, then, is to walk humbly with God at all times and in all places. Faith is to have a warm, close relationship with God. Inherent to faith is then also deep sorrow on account of my sins.

In order to benefit from what Christ has done one needs faith. Faith is to walk with God, holding on to all that God says, believing all that God has promised. Faith therefore is a realisation of one's unworthiness, and a realisation of God's mercy in the face of this unworthiness. Then I can stand in the court of God and say in response to the accusations of Satan: "But God, you promised that Christ died for me and made payment for my sins." We may remind God of what He promised in His Word, "*that whoever believes in Him (Christ) should not perish but have everlasting life*" (John 3:16). I believe that Christ died for me, a sinner, and He imputed to me His perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness. So I believe too that God will respond, "yes My child, your dirty clothes have been washed clean in Christ's blood."

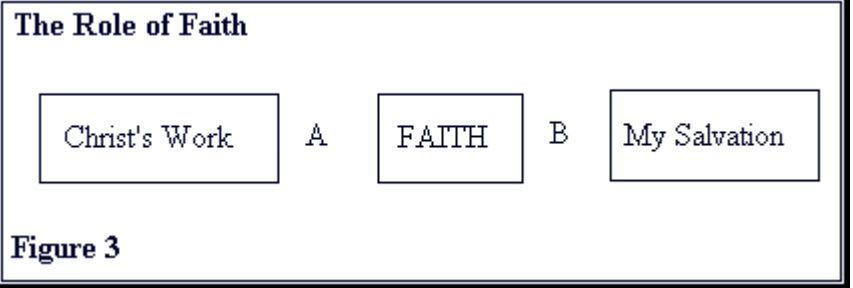
SALVATION THROUGH CHRIST'S WORK AND FAITH?

It is Christ who covers my sin by His perfect righteousness. Yet Christ's work is not made mine

automatically. To receive salvation through Christ's work I need faith. Faith plays a role between Christ's work and my salvation (Figure 3). But what role does faith play? Need I place a plus sign where the letter A is located, so that I get this equation: Christ's work + my faith = my salvation? If this were the case, then my faith would *add* to Christ's work, would *complete* it to make my salvation possible. In that case, I have made a contribution to my salvation.

Yet that is not Scriptural, for the apostle says that salvation is "by grace". Ephesians 2:8: "*for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.*" No, I cannot say

that my salvation depends on my faith in the same way that my salvation depends on Christ's work on the cross. I am saved *because* of Christ's work but *not because* of my faith.



What then? How am I to understand the relation between Christ's work and my salvation? Article 22 puts it like this:

"*faith is the instrument that keeps us with [Christ] in the communion of all His benefits.*" Yes, I need faith to be saved, faith plays a role between Christ's work and my salvation. But faith is nothing more than the *instrument* by which I share in Christ's benefits. I am not saved because of my faith; I am saved because of Christ *through* my faith (or "by faith").

This is a covenantal concept. God makes promises to me and I am to believe these promises. If I do not believe them, I cannot be saved. I must make a point of believing. In the covenant it is my responsibility do so, both in the ups and downs of life. Here we have the two sides inherent in the covenant: promise and obligation. God has promised me salvation and He gives me faith both to believe in and to hold on to these promises . When I believe I can only thank God that He gives the gift of faith.

ARTICLE 23

OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS BEFORE GOD

Concerning the confession that our righteousness before God consists in the forgiveness of our sins as obtained by Jesus Christ, deBres writes in Article 23, "*This (ie, the fact that Christ's obedience is imputed to us) is sufficient to cover all our iniquities and to give us confidence in drawing near to God, freeing our conscience of fear, terror, and dread, so that we do not follow the example of our first father, Adam, who trembling tried to hide and covered himself with fig leaves.*" Knowing that deBres was raised as a Roman Catholic helps one to appreciate a confession such as this. According to Roman Catholic theology, if one sins, he needs to make amends to God, and one approaches God by the following means:

- 1) **One must have a broken heart and acknowledge his wrongdoings;**
- 2) **One must confess his sins with the mouth;**
- 3) **One must make amends for his wrongs by doing good works.**

This system left the sinner with no comfort. For, how does one know whether his heart is sufficiently broken and contrite, if he has confessed adequately, or if he has performed enough good works to make amends? What haunted Luther so badly before his conversion from Roman Catholicism was, 'how can I be just before God?' A theology such as this brings much uncertainty. Granted, we call this a Roman Catholic theology, but, to what extent do these thoughts, questions and doubts live in our hearts? Do we not catch ourselves asking: am I really forgiven, are my sins not too great for forgiveness, have I confessed my sins adequately, is my humility deep enough? We too at times feel that God is far away, that He does not hear us, that we are not forgiven. It is clear from the last paragraph of Article 23 that deBres too battled with such questions.

DeBres could confess that justification is sufficient for the covering and forgiveness of my sins, ie, it is sufficient that God declares that Christ's substitutionary work covers my sins and iniquities. This knowledge gives confidence, says deBres. Imagine if we had to justify ourselves! "*For indeed, if we had to appear before God, relying -be it ever so little- on ourselves or some other creature, (woe be to us!) we would be consumed.*"

Hebrews 10:11,12 &18 speak of Christ's completed work of forgiveness. "*And every(OT) priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this man (Christ), after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down at the right hand of God.... Now where there is remission of (sins), there is no longer an offering for sin.*" Christ paid for sin. His perfect satisfaction paid for my sins, His righteousness covered my unrighteousness, and His holiness covered my unholiness.

Is there then still a need for God's child, on account of his sins, to run away from God?! Not at all! DeBres records the consequence of God's declaration that we are justified in Christ: we have received "*confidence in drawing near to God, freeing our conscience of fear, terror and dread ...*" This is scriptural, for in Hebrews 10:19-22 we read, "*Therefore brethren, **having boldness to enter the Holy Place by the blood of Jesus**, by a new and living way which he consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, his flesh, and having a high priest over the house of God, **let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith...***" Nothing at all may stop us any longer from coming into God's presence! We may pray with boldness.

Has God not established His covenant with me? Has He not given me faith? I may, *must*, then hold on to His unfailing Word of promise: God's work of justification, His declaration of my righteousness through the blood of Jesus Christ, is true concerning myself. God has declared me, a guilty sinner, forgiven, justified, innocent before Him. I am graciously returned from Satan's side to God's side. Hence I am able to pray to Him freely - despite my continuing sinfulness. I need not doubt that God will hear my prayer. God has made me His child, justified me, and so there is no room for fear. Instead, I may live with Him in

peace, confident of His love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ.

**ARTICLE 24
MAN'S SANCTIFICATION AND GOOD WORKS**

Guido deBres lived and worked in a time when the church (ie, the Roman Catholic Church) taught that in order to be saved one had to do good works. DeBres resisted this notion and hence included in the Belgic Confession an article which taught the Scriptural stance concerning the origin, place and purpose of good works in the life of the Christian. Writes deBres in Article 24, "... we do good works, but not for merit. For what could we merit? We are indebted to God, rather than He to us, for the good works we do, since it is He 'who is at work in us both to will and to work for His good pleasure.' ... Furthermore, although we do good works, we do not base our salvation on them."

SANCTIFICATION

To make clear why the Christian does good works and at the same time does not earn anything through the good works he does, deBres explains the doctrine of sanctification. The term 'Sanctification' literally means 'to make holy' (derived from two Latin words meaning 'holy' and 'make'). Terms as 'conversion', 'regeneration', 'recreation' and 'born again' are all essentially synonyms of the term sanctification.

Article 23 discussed the justification of fallen man. God's elect, who together with all of mankind after the fall into sin were in bondage to Satan and hence dead in sin, received forgiveness of sins, were removed from Satan's side and brought back to God's side (see Figure 1). God had sent His Son to earth to pay for sin on the cross of Calvary. It was because of the shedding of Christ's blood that the sinner is justified. Justification (said Article 23) is a declaration on God's part concerning the elect sinners that they are innocent, righteous, just, restored and acceptable in God's presence.

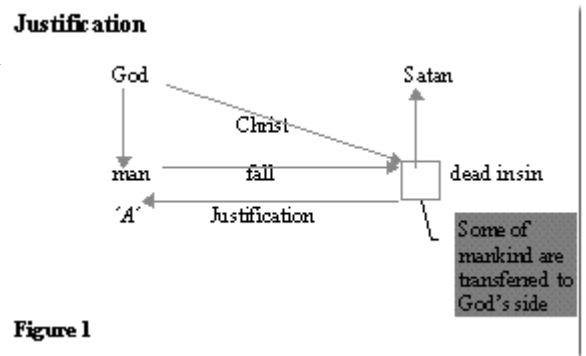


Figure 1

But what of the sinner who has been justified, brought back to God (person 'A' in Figure 1)? Is he still dead in sin? Is he still inclined to image his father, the Devil? Justification does not change the nature of

the sinner; justification changes his *legal* standing before God - he is now innocent, not guilty, justified. As it is, though, God does not leave the justified sinner in his deadness; God rather changes his nature. This change is known as **sanctification** (see Figure 2). Those whom God in His good pleasure justifies through the blood of Christ He also sanctifies through the Spirit of Christ. You cannot be justified and at the same time not be sanctified. All who benefit from justification are also sanctified. Though justification and sanctification are two different acts of God in the life of the sinner, these two cannot be separated. God does not sanctify a person still in bondage to Satan, and hence destined for hell, nor does God let a

person restored to Him remain dead in sin. All those who are justified receive sanctification and all who are sanctified have also been justified. Consider the following table:

	JUSTIFICATION	SANCTIFICATION
When	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good Friday 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pentecost
How	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • by means of the blood of Christ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • by means of the Spirit of Christ

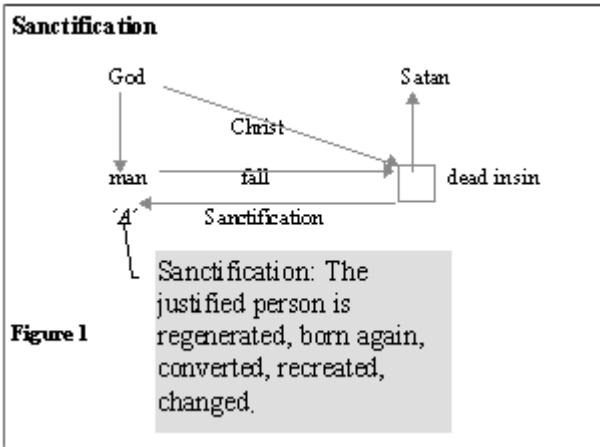


Figure 1

Application

• the work of Christ FOR me

• the work of Christ IN me

The cross of Calvary is most certainly the high point in the history of salvation. That Christ by His suffering and death on the cross bore God's wrath against my sins on my behalf gives me much cause for thankfulness. But I cannot stop at what Christ accomplished on the cross, for God's work of redemption has moved *past* Calvary. At Pentecost Christ's Spirit was poured out so that I could be a new, changed person. In our thinking, then, we also need to move past Calvary (justification) and come to grips with the reality of Pentecost - sanctification. Christ's work on Pentecost is life-renewing, and this work of Christ must be reflected in the way I live.

SCRIPTURAL EVIDENCE FOR SANCTIFICATION

Although sanctification is a New Testament term, we do find a description of it in both the Old and New Testaments.

Deuteronomy 30:6

Here we read that should the Lord need to carry out His punishment of exile on a disobedient covenant people, He would let them return from exile if they showed evidence of repentance. But the Lord promised to do more than let them return to the land of their fathers. We read, "*And the LORD your God will **circumcise your heart** and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.*"

The phrase 'circumcision of the heart' describes the concept of regeneration (=sanctification).

Jeremiah 31:31-33

"*Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.... But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: **I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their heart;** and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.*"

The phrase 'put My law in their minds, and write it on their heart' describes the concept of regeneration.

Ezekiel 36:26

"*I will **give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you** and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.*"

Here is an accumulation of phrases, each in turn describing something of the notion of sanctification, regeneration, conversion.

John 3:3

In the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, Jesus describes regeneration as being born again.

Said Jesus to Nicodemus, "... *Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is **born again**, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*"

Ephesians 2:4,5

"*But God, ... even when we were dead in trespasses, **made us alive** together with Christ.*"

To be regenerated, sanctified, converted, means to be made alive.

From the above, it is evident that regeneration, sanctification, is a work of God: "**The Lord your God will circumcise your heart.**" Said God, "**I will put my law in their minds; I will give you a new heart; I will put my Spirit within you.**" In his letter to the Ephesians Paul too mentions our being made alive to God, "**But God made us alive.**" I cannot make myself alive, nor can I give myself a new heart. It is beyond me to do such a revolutionary work. Further, sanctification (=regeneration) involves a radical change so that one becomes what one was not. The inner person is changed, radically changed, so that the dead becomes alive. The Canons of Dort describe sanctification this way: "regeneration is a supernatural, most powerful...work." It is "not inferior in power to creation or the resurrection of the dead" (Chapter III/IV, Article 12).

REGENERATION: IT HAS A BEGINNING AND IT IS ONGOING

1) The beginning of regeneration: the point in time at which a person was changed. For example, Paul's conversion took place at a very specific moment while he was journeying to Damascus. However, for most people conversion is a process in time. (Just as Adam beginning his life as an adult is not a norm for us, so Paul's instant conversion is not a norm for us.) One may not be able to specify the place or time of one's conversion, yet there is a beginning to every conversion and the resulting change is noticeable over time.

2) Regeneration is ongoing: being born again is a continual, daily process in the life of the Christian.

Although our confessions do not have separate terms for these two aspects of conversion, both are confessed. Concerning the beginning of regeneration, the Canons of Dort puts it this way, "*By the efficacious (=effective) working of the same regenerating Spirit He also penetrates into the innermost recesses of man. He opens the closed and softens the hard heart, circumcises that which was uncircumcised, and instils new qualities into the will. He makes the will, which was dead, alive; which was bad, good; which was unwilling, willing; and which was stubborn, obedient. He moves and strengthens it so that, like a good tree, it may be able to produce the fruit of good works*" (Chapter III/IV, Article 11). The point being made here is that at a particular point in time God the Spirit makes the above changes in a person. It is when the Spirit penetrates the heart of a person that the person is born again, changed, begins a new life as a Christian.

Concerning the continuation of regeneration, we read in Lord's Day 33, Q & A 88 that "*true repentance or conversion of man is the **dying** of the old nature and the **coming to life** of the new.*" Note here that it does not say that conversion takes place when the old man 'died' and the new 'came' to life. No, 'dying' and 'coming to life' are written in present tense. In other words, conversion is not a not once-off, never-to-be-repeated occurrence in the life of the Christian, but is rather an ongoing process. Hence Q & A 89 explains the dying of the old nature as a "*heartfelt sorrow that we have offended God by our sin, and **more and more** to hate and flee from it.*" The person justified by the blood of Christ is changed, born again. However, this changed heart is not immediately perfected. This is a life long process by which one is made to grow in the Lord daily, 'more and more.'

What are the implications of all this for me? I, by the grace of God, have been declared just by God in the blood of Christ, and so (since the justified are also sanctified) I am changed, converted, born again. However, this allows me no room for complacency, as if I may assume that now 'I have arrived'. For I am not yet perfected. On my part there needs to be growth daily. Daily I sin, so daily I must have sorrow for sin. Daily I need to seek forgiveness. Sanctification is an ongoing process, and therefore it means that growth in faith and holiness must be evident in my life. It is because there needs to be evidence of such growth that the elders in their home visits also inquire about whether I have grown in the last months.

TURNING TO GOD AND TURNING AWAY FROM SIN

It is critical that we understand the above two aspects of conversion and what it means for us individually. Conversion, regeneration, means to be turned away from Satan and towards God. Conversion means that our focus is 'God-ward.' Before we were justified we focussed on Satan, but conversion means we are made to do a 180 degree turn (as it were). Consequently, God becomes the centre of our attention and life.

The following table helps to illustrate these two aspects of conversion.

DYING OF THE OLD NATURE	COMING TO LIFE OF THE NEW NATURE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A turning away from sin 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A turning to God
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involves sorrow on account of sin 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involves joy on account of redemption
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"To grieve with heartfelt sorrow that we have offended God by our sin"</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"It is a heartfelt joy in God through Christ"</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A resolve <i>"more and more to hate (sin) and flee from it."</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A resolve <i>"to live according to the will of God in all good works."</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • humility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • obedience

Some passages from Scripture make clear that conversion (=regeneration, rebirth, sanctification) involves both a turning from sin and a turning to God.

Deuteronomy 30:1-3. Israel is warned that, if they should refuse to place God in the centre of their attention, God will send them into exile. Yet God also tells Israel what it is that He will do should they come to repentance. *"Now it shall come to pass, when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among the nations where the LORD your God drives you, and you **return to the LORD your God and obey His voice**, according to all that I command you today, you and your children, with all your heart and with all your soul, that the LORD your God will bring you back from captivity, and have compassion on you, and gather you again from all the nations where the LORD your God has scattered you."* Here God Himself makes the connection between being turned towards God and being turned away from sin (obeying Him). Israel had only two options: to be turned towards God and receive God's blessing or to be turned away from God, focussing instead on sin and disobedience, and consequently being separated from God: exiled.

In 1 Samuel 7 we read of Israel's victory over the Philistines only as a result of their repentance and return to the Lord. God had permitted His ark to be taken from Israel because of Israel's sin. Now that the ark had been come back to the Promised Land, Samuel said to Israel in verse 3, *"... If you **return to the LORD with all your hearts**, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths from among you, and **prepare your hearts for the LORD, and serve Him only.**"* Israel was called to make a 180 degree turn away from idol-centred worship to God-centred worship. Israel was called to put away sin and to turn to the Lord with all their heart. Israel had to *change* from the way they had been.

REPENTANCE: A BROKEN HEART ON ACCOUNT OF SIN

That this change also involves sorrow for sin is evident from Israel's response to the call for repentance. We read in 1 Samuel 7:6, *"So they gathered together at Mizpah, drew **water**, and poured it out before the LORD. And they **fasted** that day, and said there, "We have sinned against the LORD."* From Leviticus we know that water played the symbolic role of the washing away of sin. Fasting designated a broken spirit, a sense of humility. In their repentance, then, Israel sorrowed on account of sin, was broken hearted, as they turned away from sin in order to seek the Lord. Such grief and sorrow is characteristic of repentance from sin. Repentance accompanied by sorrow on account of sin can be found in more passages of Scripture:

Psalm 38

David, in anguish over his sins, prays, *"There is no soundness in my flesh because of Your anger, nor any health in my bones **because of my sin**. For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden they are too heavy for me (vs 3,4). ... I am **troubled**, I am **bowed down greatly**; I go **mourning** all the day*

long (vs 6)... *For I am ready to fall, and my **sorrow** is continually before me. **For I will declare my iniquity; I will be in anguish over my sin.** (vs 17,18)."*

Psalm 51

This whole Psalm of David exudes a spirit of brokenness on account of his sin with Bethsheba. In full awareness as to Who he sinned against, David prays in all humility, "***For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against You, You only have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight (vs 3,4). ... Purge me ... wash me ... make me hear joy and gladness, that the bones you have broken may rejoice.** (vs 7,8)."*

Jeremiah 3:21-25

God calls Israel to repentance, "*Return, you backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings.*" Israel responds by indeed turning back to God with due shame and humility. Israel replied, "*Indeed we do come to You, for You are the LORD our God.... Truly, in the LORD our God is the salvation of Israel.... **We lie down in our shame, and our reproach covers us.** For we have sinned against the LORD our God, we and our fathers ..."*

Ezekiel 36:26, 31

Said God to Israel, "*I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.... Then you will remember your evil ways and your deeds that were not good; and you will **loathe yourselves in your own sight, for your iniquities and your abominations.**"*

Repentance involves despising oneself on account of one's sin, turning away from sin and evil to God, wanting and striving to obey Him and to do His will.

The Spirit's work of sanctification is a radical change in the self, whereby I turn in humility from sin to God with a heartfelt desire to do what God wants. It means that my whole focus in life becomes God directed, with the result that I adopt a new lifestyle and a new attitude.

THE NEW LIFESTYLE OF THE CHRISTIAN: A WALKING IN THE SPIRIT

Paul describes the practices that used to characterise the Corinthians before the gospel of Jesus Christ came to Corinth and met with faith in the saints. Says Paul: "*And such **were** some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God*" (1 Corinthians 6:11). What were the Corinthians like before they were washed, justified, sanctified? We read this in the preceding verses: "*Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God.*" Then follows the above quote: "*and such **were** some of you.*" Before the Corinthians were converted, some of them were idolaters, homosexuals, drunkards, etc. But, now that they were washed in the blood of Christ (justification) and renewed by the Holy Spirit of Christ (sanctification) they are idolaters, homosexuals, drunkards, etc, no longer. The Spirit has changed them radically so that they were made new creatures. Although this change is a radical change of the inner self, this change **cannot** remain hidden. This change is evident in the way one lives.

Justification is **God's** work for me. I embrace this work in faith and make it my own. Sanctification is equally **God's** work in me, and this work too I embrace in faith. The change God worked in me I am to *believe*. **God** says I am justified; **God** also says I am sanctified. If God says this, then I believe that Christ died for me and hence I also receive all the consequences of his redeeming work. Likewise, if I believe that I am sanctified, I also live accordingly. Sanctification is something I am to pursue. I am to *make it my business* to be sanctified. That means I fight, for example, my weakness for alcohol, my desire to throw up my legs and vegetate before a television. Although the Holy Spirit changes me, it will not do for me to

relax my fight against sin.

Paul also encouraged the believers at Rome to live in a fashion consistent with their sanctification. The Holy Spirit does indeed work in us, but -in true covenantal fashion- we are also to busy ourselves with that work. In Romans 5 Paul had described justification, and in chapter 6 he goes on saying, "*What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?*" (vs 1). The argument is this: since we are justified by grace, receive forgiveness of sins by grace (justification), should we not sin so that grace might be poured out on us more abundantly? However, Paul is adamant in his answer to this question. "*Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? ... For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death (through baptism), certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection.... For he who has died has been freed from sin.... For the death that (Christ) died He died to sin once and for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. **Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord***" (Romans 6:2-11). To have died to sin and to have been raised with Christ in His resurrection means regeneration, sanctification. Paul states the fact that his readers have been made alive to God.

Since his readers have been sanctified, Paul urges them to be consistent, and to live according to this truth. If his listeners are indeed raised to a new life, born again, regenerated, converted, sanctified, they are to live that way too. Says Paul in Romans 6:12,13, "*Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts.*" The reality of sanctification prompts the command to live as sanctified persons. So the "saints" of Rome (1:7) are told: "*And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but **present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.***" The sanctified sinner, born again as he is through the Holy Spirit, is not inevitably bound to give in to every sin that comes upon his path. To give oneself to a sin is not inevitable. Says Paul in verse 14, "***For sin shall not have dominion over you.***" I don't have to give myself to the sin that is dangled so enticingly before me. I can never say that 'I couldn't help it' that I fell for temptation. "*No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it*" (1 Corinthians 10:13). I am always one hundred percent responsible for my failure to resist temptation to sin, for I am born again, raised to a new life, enabled to resist sin. I am instructed by God to say No to sin, to hate it and flee from it. I believe that I am sanctified and so sin shall not have dominion over me.

True, it certainly happens that I fail to resist sin; though changed I am not at all made perfect already. Paul himself, God's chosen instrument to the Gentiles, confessed that "*I am carnal, sold under sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand. **For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do***" (Romans 7:14,15). Sanctification does not mean perfection. In the words of LD 44: "*in this life even the holiest have only a small beginning*" of the obedience God requires. As the saints of Scripture grieved over their sins, so I too must be bothered by my sin, repent, turn away from sin and turn back to God (see further Article 15, page 68).

Christ has done much for me and in me. There must be evidence of this in my life. If Christ's renewing work cannot be seen in me, then I have not been born again. If I am not born again, then I am not justified either. A tree is known by its fruits. Here we have a duty towards each other, encouraging each other to bear fruits of faith in our lives. Fruits of faith must be there. Holiness, the fruit of the Holy Spirit, is characteristic of the life of the Christian.

Galatians 5:16 urges us to "*Walk in the Spirit*" and then adds this promise: "*and you shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh.*" God promises that if we walk in the Spirit, if we live according to the reality of our regeneration, our sanctification, then we will not fulfil the evil inclinations of the flesh. Hence we must also examine ourselves. What is it we enjoy doing, watching, reading? Can I, as a sanctified child of God truly justify the programmes I watch on TV, filled as they are with 'works of the flesh?' It is not characteristic of the child of God to delight in or to appreciate the kind of entertainment the television offers. What is characteristic of the child of God is to show forth in his life the fruit of the Spirit, to resist sin, and to have an attitude driven by the Spirit. Galatians 5:22,23 lists what such fruits are, namely, "*love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.*" The child of

God adopts for himself a style of living which images what God is like. *"And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. **If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit**"* (Galatians 5:18).

SALVATION BY GRACE; NOT BY WORKS

As said earlier, Article 24 was written by deBres at a time when the church of his day, the Roman Catholic Church, taught that in order to be saved one had to do good works. No! said deBres. My good works are covered by sin. *"We cannot do a single work that is not defiled by our flesh and does not deserve punishment. Even if we could show one good work, the remembrance of one sin is enough to make God reject it. We would then always be in doubt, tossed to and fro without any certainty, and our poor consciences would be constantly tormented, if they did not rely on the merit of the death and passion of our Saviour"* (Article 24).

Yet good works characterise the life of the Christian. How come? The Christian does good works not in order to be saved, but rather because he is saved. Those washed by the blood of Christ (justification) are also renewed by the Spirit of Christ (sanctification). I cannot, then, gain anything from doing good works, for in Christ I already am heir to the world. Rather, performing good works, obeying the law of God, is the inevitable consequence of regeneration. As Lord's Day 24 expresses it: it is impossible for those who belong to Christ to fail to bring forth fruits of thankfulness.

That I see such fruits in myself, then, becomes very much a reason to praise God. For "God is at work in us, both to will and to work for His good pleasure." Such fruits of faith in my life prompts the more to praise and gratitude. Christ's work of salvation is complete, involves both justification *and* sanctification, Good Friday *and* Pentecost.

ARTICLE 25

CHRIST, THE FULFILMENT OF THE LAW

Articles 22 and 23 confessed Christ's work of justification and article 24 Christ's work of sanctification. DeBres continues his confession concerning Christ in Article 26 by mentioning His intercessory work. Yet deBres saw a need to insert within this sequence of articles dealing with the work of Christ an article concerning the Old Testament laws and ceremonies. One wonders why. Why would deBres wish to interrupt his confession concerning Christ's work with an article devoted to the law of the Old Testament? By means of what is confessed in article 25, deBres is interacting with the circumstances of his day. DeBres saw a need to state clearly that the work of Christ on the cross was so complete that the sacrifices and ceremonies of the Old Testament law had been fulfilled. By means of this article deBres wished to underline how complete Christ's work really was.

ROMAN CATHOLICS: CONTINUE TO SACRIFICE CHRIST DAILY

The Belgic confession was completed in 1561, just after the Great Reformation had passed through Europe. In deBres' day the Roman Catholic Church, the focus of this reformation, said that though the ritual cleansings as prescribed in the Old Testament were no longer required, we still need to keep the Old Testament laws. The daily forgiveness of sins can only be obtained through the daily sacrificing of Christ. Hence the Roman Catholic sacrament of the Eucharist, in which Christ is offered daily by the priest to God (cf Lord's Day 30.80). Yet what was it that deBres confessed in articles 22 and 23? There he had insisted that Christ had already fully paid for sin. But if Christ has indeed fully paid for sin and reconciled the sinner to God, the sinner need no longer keep the ceremonial law of the OT.

CHRIST: THE FULFILMENT OF THE LAW

DeBres mentions in article 25 that the Old Testament laws have been "fulfilled". DeBres learned this from Christ's Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said, "*Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to **fulfil***" (Matthew 5:17). In Article 5 we saw how the Old and New Testaments complemented each other. The Old Testament looked forward to the Cross of Calvary and the New Testament reflects back on that cross. Jesus said that He did not destroy the Law and the Prophets which foreshadowed His coming, but rather He fulfilled them. He accomplished perfectly what the Law foreshadowed.

Should we keep the Old Testament ceremonies? No, says deBres, "*We believe that the ceremonies and symbols of the law have ceased with the coming of Christ, and that all shadows have been fulfilled, so that the **use** of them ought to be abolished among Christians.*" This means that if we should become aware of any sin against the law on our part, we no longer have to take an animal to the priest and make a sacrifice to atone for that sin (see Leviticus 4). Christ has fulfilled that requirement of the law. The Old Testament laws, ceremonies, and feasts were "*a shadow of things to come, **but the substance is of Christ***" (Colossians 2:17). Christ was the content of the laws and ceremonies; Christ was foreshadowed by these. However, in His coming to earth and performing what these ceremonies foreshadowed, Christ fulfilled them. "*Yet their truth and substance remain for us in Jesus Christ, in whom they have been fulfilled*" (Article 25).

ANABAPTISTS: A FULFILLED LAW IS AN OBSOLETE LAW

Whilst the Roman Catholics in deBres' day maintained that the ceremonies of the law should still be performed in worship today, the Anabaptists on the other hand (ie, the radical element of the Reformation) claimed that in having fulfilled the ceremonies of the law, Christ made them obsolete and hence they have no role at all any more in the New Testament dispensation. According to the Anabaptists they were of no value any longer and could therefore be ignored. This thought is still alive today, as is evidenced by the fact that preaching in Australia's churches is very predominantly based on New Testament texts.

THE ROLE OF THE LAW TODAY

If Christ's one sacrifice for sin was sufficient, if I do not have to sacrifice Christ today for the forgiveness of sins, then what role do the Old Testament laws play today? Were the Anabaptists correct in concluding that a fulfilled law became an obsolete law? If Christ has fulfilled the Law and the Prophets, do they have any role at all today?

What was it that we confessed in Article 5 concerning the authority of Holy Scripture? It was this: "*we receive all these book, (including what is written concerning the ceremonies and symbols of the law), ... as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith.*" We find these words echoed in article 25, "*In the meantime we still use the testimonies taken from the law and the prophets, both **to confirm us in the doctrine of the gospel and to order our life in all honour, according to God's will and to His glory.***"

We can use the Old Testament as evidence of what the Lord teaches us in the New Testament. It is not only the New Testament which reveals the doctrine of the gospel, but the law and the prophets do this too. Says deBres concerning the ceremonies and symbols of the law: they '*confirm us in the doctrine of the gospel.*' All the ceremonies of the Old Testament law are vivid pictures of how it is that the Lord has obtained salvation for us in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, it is the Ten Commandments which teach us to '*order our life in all honour according to God's will and to His glory.*' The New Testament certainly promotes and reinforces a lifestyle in obedience to God's ten commandments as recorded for us in the Old Testament. But it is to the Old Testament that we ought to turn to learn how the saints of old lived a life of trust in God and obedience to His commands. It is not for us to cast aside as obsolete the Old Testament revelation God preserved for us; it is for us instead to read these Scriptures, to familiarise ourselves with them and to treasure them.

Christ has finished the work He was given to do by the Father. This work, as foreshadowed by the Old Testament ceremonies and symbols of the law was fulfilled perfectly by Christ. Hence there is no need for sacrifices for sin today. Yet the Lord has preserved for us in His Word what He required in these ceremonies so that we might the more understand and appreciate our righteousness attained by Christ and thereby be confirmed in our faith. Fulfilled by Christ, the use of the ceremonies and symbols of the law have been abolished; yet their testimonies serve to confirm our faith and regulate our life of service to God.

ARTICLE 26

CHRIST'S INTERCESSION

The Roman Catholic Church of deBres' day taught that although Christ was man's Saviour, He was a fearsome person. Sinners dare not approach God in prayer through Him. Between themselves and Christ, sinners needed Mary. Mary was seen as the 'Mediatrix' (the word is the feminine form of the word Mediator) to whom one ought to pray, requesting her to intercede with her Son that He would go to the Father on the sinner's behalf. Mary could also be prayed to via the saints (see Figure 1). From this it becomes clear that the Roman Catholic Church perceived a great distance remaining between God and the justified, sanctified sinner.

MAN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD BROKEN BY SIN BUT RESTORED BY CHRIST

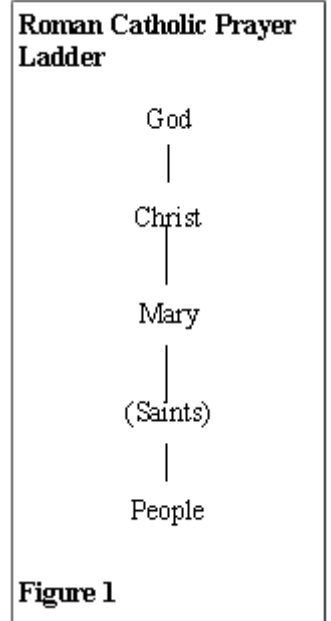
When God created us, He established a close and warm relationship between mankind and Himself. We know from Scripture that in the Garden of Eden there existed a warm communion between God and man. In Genesis 3 : 8 we read, "*And (Adam and Eve) heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day...*" How was it possible for Adam and Eve to recognise this as the sound of their God walking in the garden? To be able to recognise a sound testifies of familiarity. We need to conclude that the Lord commonly came to Adam and Eve. Here is evidence that there was an open and warm relation between God and man. The Lord spoke with Adam and Eve, and Adam and Eve for their part could speak with the Lord about the events of the day.

But this close relationship did not last. With the Fall into sin, man broke his communion with God. God, consequently, sent man out of His presence, out of the garden, sent man into a world of thorns and thistles, into a world of communion with Satan (see Figure 2, Article 14). Scripture describes fallen man as dead in sin (Ephesians 2:1). Yet it pleased the Lord to send Christ to earth in order to pay for sin. Christ bore for me the wrath of God which I deserved. In so doing all God's elect were taken from Satan's side and brought back to God's side: justification through the blood of Christ. God declared just, righteous, those whom He had chosen to eternal life, so that they could once again live in His presence (see Figure 1, Article 24). The justified sinner, once returned to God's side, was made alive, changed, renewed, recreated: sanctified through the Spirit of Christ (see Figure 2, Article 24). In a word: the relation with God, once broken in Paradise, is restored.

In article 26, deBres goes on now to confess what this restored relationship with God means for the justified, sanctified sinner. DeBres has learned from Scripture that this relationship with God is so fully restored by Christ that I can once again have communion with God. Christ's work on Calvary means that Paradise is essentially restored!

When we think of Christ we tend to associate Him with the cross of Calvary and no more. And indeed, Calvary is the climax of salvation history (justification, forgiveness of sins). However, we must beware of stopping at Calvary, for Christ, once He had finished His work on the cross, went on to do more. After He shed His blood on Good Friday (justification), Christ poured out His Spirit on Pentecost (sanctification). More, Christ is busy today too, and hence, when we think of Christ we do well to consider this work of His too. That is: Christ's work on the cross of Calvary had *consequences*, and these consequences extend to today, yes, today Christ applies to His people the work accomplished on the cross.

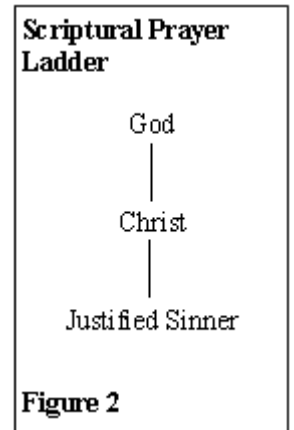
As a result of Christ's atoning work (and God's declaration of justification resulting from Christ's sacrifice), the communion of Paradise is restored. The apostle to the Hebrews draws out the consequence of forgiveness of sins. He says: "*Therefore, brethren, having **boldness** to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a high priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of*



faith..." (10:19ff). Here the 'Holiest' is a reference to the Holy of Holies of the Old Testament, ie, the place where God dwelt. To the Hebrews this symbolised the presence of God today. Here, then, is assurance that we may freely enter God's presence, yes, we are even encouraged to do so with boldness! This is the result of the work of Christ on the cross. Since Christ has been victorious long ago, it is for me today to "draw near" with boldness, to pray. The warm, open relationship of Paradise is restored between God and us! The Gospel I received from God says more than that my sins are forgiven; it says also that I can and may openly and boldly pray to God today. So I may tell Him all that is on my mind. Jesus restored me to the Father so that today already I can have a living relation with my Maker.

CHRIST IS MY ADVOCATE

That I can speak openly with my heavenly Father is because of Christ's work for me in heaven. After He completed His work on the cross, Christ left earth and ascended into Heaven. However, His departure from us did not mean an end to His interest in us. Rather, it meant the commencement of another task. To use the words of the Heidelberg Catechism: Christ's ascension into heaven benefits me in that "*He is my Advocate in heaven before His Father*" (Lord's Day 18, Q & A 49). That is: today my Saviour is active in heaven pleading my cause before the throne of the Father. Not only, then, am I *justified* by the *blood* of Christ and *sanctified* by the *Spirit* of Christ; today I may enjoy the communion of Paradise restored, may speak again to God because Christ my Saviour *intercedes* for me!



SCRIPTURAL EVIDENCE OF CHRIST'S INTERCESSION

Hebrews 7:25 describes Christ as labouring in heaven today. Christ, "*because He continues for ever, has an unchangeable priesthood. Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He ever lives to make intercession for them.*"

We may come to God through Christ, for Christ is there to intercede on behalf of the saints. Note here that the present tense is used with reference to Christ's work: *He ever **lives to make** intercession*. Christ's resurrection, or the pouring out of His Spirit, did not mark an end to His work. **Today** the ascended Christ is busy in heaven, interceding before the Father on my behalf.

1 John 2:1: "*My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an **advocate** with the Father, **Jesus Christ, the righteous.***"

'We have,' Scripture says here; it is a continuing reality. **Today** my Saviour is in Heaven acting as an advocate, a lawyer, presenting my case to the Father.

Romans 8:34: "*It is Christ who died (ie, Good Friday), and furthermore is also risen (ie, Easter Sunday), who is even at the right hand of God (ie, Ascension), who also makes intercession for us.*"

After His death, resurrection and ascension, Christ continued His work in Heaven, pleading with God for us. Note again the use of the present tense: He "*makes intercession for us.*" He works today still for our benefit.

SCRIPTURAL EVIDENCE THAT CHRIST'S INTERCESSION HAS RESULTS

In John 17:11-12, Jesus prays to the Father, saying, "Holy Father, keep through your name those whom you have given me, that they may be one as we are. While I was with them in the world, I kept them in your name. Those whom you gave me I have kept, and none of them is lost except the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled."

Jesus, about to go to the Garden of Gethsemane where He would be betrayed and arrested, intercedes to the Father for His disciples. He requests of the Father that the disciples (excluding Judas) might be kept together. What happened to the disciples after Jesus' prayer? The eleven disciples scattered. At Jesus'

crucifixion, 'all hell broke loose' (as it were). Yet we are to note that despite Satan's attacks on the disciples and their subsequent scattering, Jesus' prayer met with results. On Easter Sunday, all the disciples (except for Thomas who would join them a week later) were together again and they were met by Jesus. Whatever Jesus asks, the Father gives: the disciples **were kept** in Jesus' name.

In the same prayer, John 17:20-21, Jesus prayed, "*I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in me through their word; that they all may be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you...*"

Here Jesus prays that all who come to faith through the preaching of the disciples may be one. The events of Pentecost have been recorded for us in Acts 2. We read: "*Then those who gladly received (Peter's) word were baptised; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.... Now all who believed were **together**, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.*" Similarly, in Acts 4:4 we read of a further five thousand who believed in the Word preached by the apostles, and in verse 32 we read, "*Now the multitude of those who believed were of **one heart and one soul**; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common.*" Here we see that Jesus' prayer of intercession on behalf of the saints was **effective**.

Even in the face of the attacks of Satan, Christ prays for those who belong to Him. In Luke 22:31-32 we read of Jesus predicting that Peter would deny Him three times. "*Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat.*" Satan surely did sift Peter. Peter denied his Saviour three times. "***But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail...***" In the grip of Satan, Peter certainly went through a deep valley, but was he given up totally to Satan? Did Peter fall away? No, **for Christ prayed for Peter**, interceded for him that his faith would not fail. We read the result of Christ's prayer in Luke 22:62. After he denied Jesus three times, Peter, when he heard the cock crow and saw Jesus looking at him, recognised his sin, broke down, and wept. "*Then Peter went out and wept bitterly.*" Here again is evidence that Jesus' intercession to the Father on Peter's behalf was heard.

CHRIST'S INTERCESSION OPENS THE WAY FOR ME TO PRAY TO MY FATHER

The Intercessor I have in Heaven is not deaf to my pleas or ineffective when He speaks to God. God does not ignore Him, but grants what He requests on my behalf. This was Jesus' promise: "Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you" (John 16:23). Therefore I have all the more reason to pray boldly. I **have** been reconciled to God; hence I am allowed to speak to God freely. More, because I'm allowed to speak freely to God, I also (in gratitude) *must* speak freely and boldly to God. Christ intercedes in heaven on my behalf, and so I'm permitted to tell the Lord what is on my mind.

Furthermore, the Intercessor I have in Heaven understands exactly what is going on in my life. He is not far removed, distant, or remote from this life. For He has been on earth Himself. "*Seeing then that we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathise with our weaknesses, but was **in all points tempted as we are**, yet without sin. **Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace**, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need*" (Hebrews 4:14-16). Have I been tempted in any way? Then I may tell it to my Father, for Christ Himself was tempted in all things. Have I fallen? Then I may tell my Father that too, for Christ knows and understands my weaknesses in the face of the strengths of Satan's temptations. Present in Heaven, in the presence of my Father to whom my prayers ascend, Christ tells the Father of the weakness of the human flesh, reminds the Father of His saving work on the cross and His renewing work by the Spirit. Christ asks the Father to wash my sins away for His sake and to give me strength to go on in my fight against sin. Christ's work as intercessor **is** effective. Whatever Christ asks is granted (cf John 14:13f; 15:16; 16:23). This is so encouraging for me to know. My sins might make me reluctant to go to God, might make me doubt if God will hear me. But I am to remember that Scripture tells me to go boldly to God's throne of grace and to tell Him all that is in my heart. I may tell Him of the battles I have from day to day, and of my struggles in fighting against sin. The Lord does understand, He does hear, and He does give strength to go on. The psalms of David, prayers as they are,

give us examples of how to pray openly and boldly.

Christ's work on the cross of Calvary certainly is central to my salvation, but Christ's work did not halt at Calvary. Christ is busy **today**. It is because Christ is busy today in an intercessory capacity that I may talk to God. When I talk to God, Christ is busy on my behalf, interceding for me. What a rich Gospel this is for me in the grind of my life today! "*We believe that we have no access to God (whom we offended in Paradise) except through the only Mediator and Advocate Jesus Christ the righteous. For this purpose He became man ... that we men might not be barred from but have access to the divine majesty*" (Article 26).

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE: A CONSTANT WALKING AND TALKING WITH GOD

The life of the Christian is far more than the usual activities that fill one's day, more than what meets the eye. The life of the Christian is a life **with God** at all times, in all places. The life of the Christian is a walking and a talking with God, enjoying an **active** relationship with God. This is possible, for I am reconciled with my Creator. The distance between me and God, incurred by sin, is gone. I am God's child. Consequently, every moment of my life I live in the presence of my God. Moment by moment God is with me, close to me, whether I am engaged in work or relaxation. There is communication between God and me; as I walk or work, I may talk to my God through prayer, and God talks to me through His Word.

This means that each of my days should be characterised by prayer. God does not place a limit on the number of times I may pray to Him in one day. I may pray to God in addition to my prayers at the start and close of a day and at the commencement and conclusion of every meal. To restrict prayer to these times only is to restrict my communication with God. This means too that I may pray even when I cannot accompany prayer with folded hands, closed eyes, bent knees, or a bowed head (though there is much to be said for each of these if the situation allows it). In the ups and downs of every hour of the day I may ask the Lord for strength to do a task, wisdom to meet a challenge I don't know how to face, patience with the children, whether I'm at home, in the office, on the work site, in the garden or in the car. I may also express my thankfulness to God at any time of the day, be it for a beautiful rainbow, for sunshine, for a good time with the children, for having received strength, wisdom, or endurance as was required. I may tell God all I feel or experience at any time of the day. There is nothing in the life of His children which does not interest God. Nothing in my life is too great or too trivial for God to take an interest in it. Such is His providence that **all** things are in His control, including the red traffic light when I'm running late or the empty fuel tank when there's no fuel station in sight. I may tell God all that is in my heart, and I may tell Him my needs, plainly. My prayers don't need to be composed of fancy words and phrases. I am allowed to be open to the Lord, for that is what it means to truly walk and talk with God.

To be busy with God continuously is a consequence of Christ's redeeming work for and in me. Constant communication with the Lord affects my entire attitude in life, for such close communion with the Lord makes me increasingly trusting, humble, thankful, and dependent upon God. A close relationship with God is to know myself safe in Father's hand every moment of the day. We live on this side of the Cross of Calvary, and so may live the results of Calvary in our daily lives. Calvary, then, means more to me than the forgiveness of my sins. Calvary means that I am justified, that I am sanctified, yes, that today I live a life of communion with my Father in heaven.

EXCURSUS ON THE LORD'S PRAYER

We read in Luke 11:1 that the twelve disciples stood around Jesus, listening in on His conversations with His Father in heaven. When He finished His prayer, one of the twelve asked of Jesus the question on the minds of them all: "Lord, teach us to pray, as John [the Baptist] taught his disciples."

Jesus obliged their question, and taught them to pray. He told the disciples *who* God was; He was not a heavy-fisted tyrant, nor was a disinterested stranger; He was *Father* - as the term was defined in the OT (see, for example, Deuteronomy 32:4-14, especially verse 6).

As to *what* the disciples should pray, Jesus reminded them that all of life is to be God-centred, and so the disciples' prayers were to be God-centred too; they should pray first of all that God's name be hallowed.

The disciples, Jesus continued, should pray from their daily context, from the setting of war and the antithesis that characterises this life; they should pray that God's kingdom be made to come since in this fallen world there are many who live in rebellion against God's kingship and refuse to submit to His authority. It is by all acknowledging God's kingship, by God's kingdom being made to come, that God's Name receives the glory that is His due.

Further, Jesus continued, the disciples should ask that they receive the gift of obedience; they should ask that they be made to deny their own will in order to do God's will, God's commands. Those first three petition all hang together, for it is through man's obeying God's commands that His kingdom is made to come, and so God's name receives the glory.

Jesus taught His disciples to follow these first three petitions with three more petitions. The second cluster of three petitions was not to revolve around the self, though. Rather, a prayer for daily bread was to be prayed with God's glory in mind. That is: it is through our obeying God's commands that God's kingdom is made to come and His name hallowed. But to obey God's commands one needs strength, needs food, needs sleep, needs faithfulness, love, humility, clothes, work, contentment, etc. Jesus would have the disciples pray for "daily bread" in order that they might be able to obey God's commands, so that in turn God's kingdom come and He be glorified. God-centred.

The fifth petition about forgiveness of sins dovetails again with the fourth and the ones before. For the bodily needs God gives in answer to the fourth petition are daily misused through us. Though God gives us adequate in terms of food and money, clothes and work, freedom and time to study His Word (so that in turn we might be equipped to do His will, make His kingdom come, glorify His name), we for our part repeatedly *misuse* His many good gifts. Through that misuse we chalk up a debt with God, a debt that blocks us from receiving more of the gifts we need to do His will, make His kingdom come, glorify His name. So we need to pray that the Lord God please *forgive* the debt we daily accumulate through our sins. God in mercy for Jesus' sake does forgive our debt with Him, so that in turn the way is open again for Him to provide us with the needs required to do His will and make His kingdom come - to the greater glory of God's most wonderful Name.

The sixth petition, too, dovetails with the previous five. Where there is forgiveness, the Lord God again supplies daily bread - for the greater glory of God's most wonderful Name. That's a reality Satan loathes. So He sets before us temptations geared to make us misuse again God's gifts, so that in turn we accumulate a debt with God - and God does not receive the glory that is His due. So Jesus instructs His disciples to ask God please to prevent that they come into a situation of temptation, and to deliver them from the evil one.

Just how God-centred pray (and all of life) is to be is pointed up again in the doxology Jesus adds to the prayer He taught His disciples. "For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory."

After His instruction concerning what to pray, Jesus added this promise: "Ask, and it will be given to you" (Luke 11:9). Jesus' point was not that the disciples should ask for anything they desired, and then expect to receive it; Jesus' point was that the disciples should ask for anything *in agreement with the thrust of the Lord's Prayer* and they will receive it.

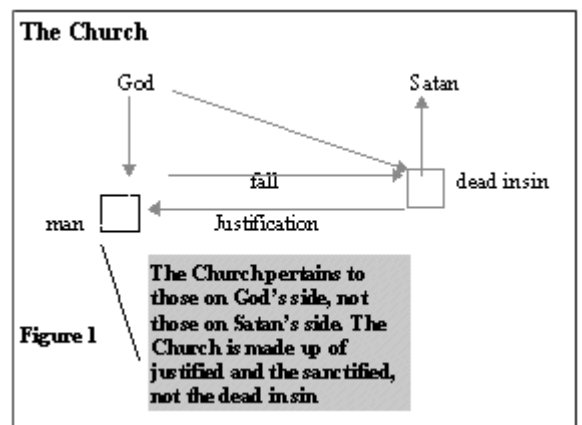
ARTICLE 27

THE CATHOLIC CHRISTIAN CHURCH

The article concerning the Church is as much an article of faith as any other article of the Belgic Confession. The fact that we can see churches around us tempts us to define the church on the basis of what we see instead of on the basis of God's revelation. Sunday by Sunday, though, we confess that we believe a holy catholic Church, and so whatever we say about the Church needs to be based on Scripture alone - even if the Lord's revelation about the Church flies in the face of what we see around us.

The articles of the Belgic Confession were not randomly sequenced and hence it is not without significance that the material of Article 27 follows the material of the previous articles. These articles dealt with how God restored the relationship between Himself and His elect after the Fall into sin. God gave His only Son (Article 17) so that through His sacrifice on the cross (Article 21) persons enslaved to sin and Satan might be justified before God (Articles 22 & 23). By the atoning work of the Christ, those from Satan's side who were chosen to life were transferred to God's side. These elect persons, justified through the blood of Christ, were also sanctified by the Spirit of Christ - sanctification (Article 24). The bond with God, once broken by the fall into sin, was restored so that, through the intercessory work of Christ, redeemed sinners may come again into the presence of holy God in prayer (Article 26). All this material is summarised in Article 27, when deBres speaks of "the true Christian believers, who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, are washed by His blood, and are sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit."

These redeemed persons, washed by the blood of Christ and sanctified by His Spirit, deBres continues, form the objects of the Church (see Figure 1). The Church does not pertain to those persons still left on Satan's side (the reprobate). The Church pertains to those persons who have been brought from Satan's side back to God's side (the elect). (This, of course, is not to say that there are no reprobate in the Church; see first paragraph of Article 29). You cannot separate the doctrine of the Church from the doctrine of God's election. At the same time, as will be explained below, one cannot equate the Church with the elect.



THE CHURCH IS THE WORK OF THE TRIUNE GOD

God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are each involved with the Church. **1) God the Father elected** to life certain persons from the whole of fallen mankind. These elect God gave to His Son, for whom the Son in turn shed His blood. **2) From amongst those given to Him by the Father, God the Son gathers** the Church. The Son is still busy gathering His Church today, and will continue to do so until the Last Day. Therefore we cannot say today that the Church is complete. The Church can be compared to a building under construction, with the final building looking totally different from its very initial stage. Christ's church gathering work spans the centuries. Not a single generation has seen both the Church's foundation AND its completion. All that one sees of Christ's work of building His Church in the span of a lifetime is but a small segment of the total project. For that reason I cannot make a confession concerning the Church on the basis of what I see of the Church today. **3) God the Holy Spirit changes the hearts of the elect**, regenerating them so that among the elect there is ongoing renewal, growth, and an increase in holiness so that in the Church there may indeed be the holiness there ought to be.

The confessions speak of this work of the Triune God as follows: in Lord's Day 21.54 we read, "*What do you believe concerning the holy catholic church of Christ? I believe that the **Son of God**, out of the whole human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, **gathers, defends and preserves** for Himself, by **His Spirit and Word**, in the unity of the true faith, a church **chosen** (that is the work of the Father) to everlasting life.*" The elect, chosen by the Father, are gathered by the Son into His Church, by means of His Holy Spirit (who sanctifies the elect) and by His Word. Article 27 also speaks of the work of Triune

God with respect to the Church. *"We believe and profess one catholic or universal Church, which is a **holy congregation and assembly of the true Christian believers** (ie, chosen, set apart by the Father), who expect their entire salvation in **Jesus Christ**, are washed by His blood, and are sanctified and sealed by the **Holy Spirit**."*

These persons elected by the Father, justified by the Son, and sanctified by the Holy Spirit, have all been transferred from Satan's side to God's side. This body of the saved -elected, justified, sanctified- is not itself the Church. Though the general Christian world around us conceives of the church as the totality of the elect (all those restored to God's side), the Scripture does not permit this understanding. (If the Church were all the elect, the mandate of Article 28 would lose its punch.)

ORIGIN OF THE TERM CHURCH

The English word 'Church' is derived from the Greek word 'kuriake,' meaning 'belonging to the Lord'. This word characterises well the fact that the Church was bought by the blood of the Lord, and so belongs to Him. However, the word 'kuriake' does not appear in the Bible as a word for church. Instead, the Bible uses the word 'ecclesia.' This word was well known to the Greeks of the early New Testament era to describe an assembly. We come across the word in Acts 19, in the context of the riot instigated by Demetrius the silversmith in Ephesus. In verse 32 we read, *"Some therefore cried one thing and some another, for the **assembly** was confused, and most of them did not know why they had come together."* The city clerk challenged the crowd that *"if you have any other inquiry to make, it shall be determined in the lawful **assembly**"* (vs 39). Having said that, he *"dismissed the **assembly**,"* (vs 41). In each of these cases the Greek uses here the word 'ecclesia'. This was the common Greek word for a meeting, a get-together, a gathering, an assembly. Inherent to the word 'ecclesia' is the notion of gathering.

Further, God's NT revelation is based on His Old Testament revelation. As it turns out, the word 'ecclesia' appeared frequently in the Greek translation of the OT - as translation of a Hebrew word that again means 'gathering', 'assembly'. This term occurs for example in Deuteronomy 5:22, where Moses recalls the time when God made His covenant with Israel at Mt Sinai, and gave His ten commandments. That meeting at the foot of Mt Sinai is circumscribed like this: *"These words the LORD spoke to all your **assembly**..."* Since both the OT and the Greek speaking world of Paul's day used the word 'ecclesia' to describe an assembly of people, it is not correct for us to read the word 'ecclesia' in the New Testament as if it describes all the elect.

DEFINITION OF THE TERM CHURCH

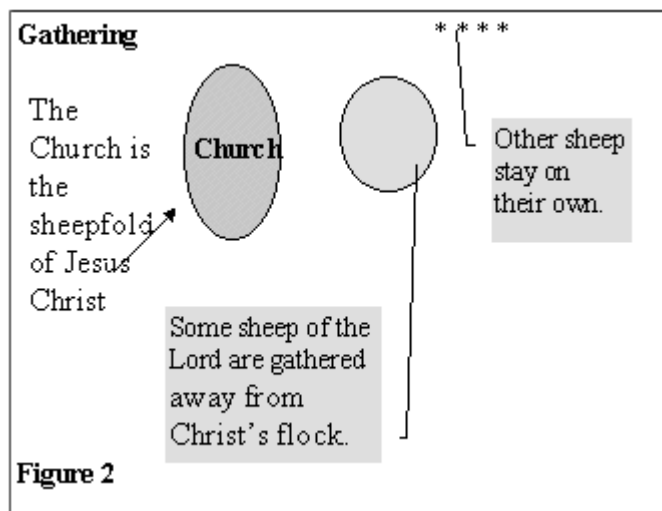
When speaking of the Church, a distinction must be made between **the people of God**, the elect, on the one hand and the **gathering of the people of God** on the other. The Church is not the equivalent of the people of God. One cannot say that 'the elect' and 'the Church' are the same thing. Rather, the Church is the **gathering** of the people of God, of the elect. DeBres makes this distinction in Article 27. He writes, *"We believe and profess one catholic or universal Church, which is a holy **congregation and assembly of the true Christian believers**"* (Article 27). That is: the Church is not (all of) the true Christian believers, but is the *gathering* of the true Christian believers. (Again, the practical consequences of this distinction will be drawn out in Article 28.)

When Jesus, then, in Matthew 16:18 used the word 'ecclesia', His hearers on the road to Caesarea Philippi knew what Jesus was speaking about. He told Peter that *"I will build My church,"* and His hearers understood Jesus to speak not of an invisible, global entity comprising all the elect; they understood Jesus to mean an assembly, a gathering - for that's what the word 'ecclesia' meant. Moreover, this gathering of Christ's would be distinctive from other gatherings in that He speaks of My Church; My assembly.

Paul addressed a letter *"to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ"* (1 Thessalonians 1:1). The mailman who had to deliver this letter to Thessalonica did not think in terms of an invisible entity of the elect of Thessalonica that could not be located. Rather, the common use of the word 'ecclesia' prompted the mailman to think of a gathering, an assembly of the Thessalonians, something real, something identifiable, something visible. As to which assembly of Thessalonians was to

receive the letter, the mailman could discover that by the addition of the words "in God the Father." That is: this letter was not addressed to an assembly of, say, all the citizens of the city of Thessalonica; this letter was addressed to a gathering of persons united "in God the Father". Nor was this letter addressed to the assembly in the Jewish synagogue (the words "in God the Father" could apply to them); this letter was addressed to "*the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*" The mailman had to deliver the letter to the gathering of *Christians*, the Christian church. Yet Paul knew that this particular gathering did not include all the Christians of town, for he added at the end of his letter the instruction that "*this epistle be read to all the holy brethren*" (5:27). Here is evidence for the distinction between the sum total of believers versus the gathering of the believers. Paul addressed his epistle to the **church** of the Thessalonians, ie, the gathering, the assembly of the believers in Thessalonica, and charges this assembly to insure that this epistle was read to all the holy brethren, ie, those believers not gathered there with them in that assembly.

What then is the Church? The Church is not all the elect but the *gathering* of the elect. The implication of this reality is that there are elect persons outside the Church, persons who -for whatever reason- keep separate from the assembly of true believers. This is what Jesus also said when He spoke of the Church as a sheepfold: "*And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd*" (John 10:16). See Figure 2. We should then not be surprised to find other believers in town, be it that they meet together in a place of their own choosing or that they wander on their own. (It's precisely this reality that makes possible -and necessary- the call of Article 28 to join the church. You cannot join something to which you already belong.)



Jesus' use of the future tense in Jn 10:16 ("*there will be one flock*") points up the goal of His Church gathering work. Today the Church is still under construction. Today the Lord is still busy gathering His own into His Church. One day, though, (the Last Day) all the elect will be gathered into one. This is what John was shown in the vision he saw on Patmos. In Revelation 14:1 we read, "*Then I (John) looked, and behold, a Lamb (Christ) standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty four thousand, having his Father's name written on their foreheads.*" The 144,000 is not to be taken literally, but, as with much of the book of Revelation, is to be understood symbolically. The 144,000 is symbolic of all the elect: the totality of Christ's Church (see Revelation 14:4). When Christ's church-gathering work is complete, then the "gathering of the people of God" will constitute the same group as "the people of God."

THE FOUR CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CHURCH

The Church revealed by God in Scripture has various characteristics. In the course of church history, four have commonly been confessed. The Nicene Creed, for example, mentions the following attributes: "*I believe one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.*" With this creed dating back to the year 325 A.D., believers have for almost 1700 years already confessed, on the basis of Scripture, 1) the Church's unity, 2) the Church's holiness, 3) the Church's catholicity, and 4) the Church's apostolicity. This too is a confession based not on what man sees of the Church but on what Scripture says concerning the Church. These attributes characterise the church today (whether we see them or not), and will characterise the church forever. These attributes are God's *gifts* to the Church and at the same time are a *mandate* to the Church. On the one hand the Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic; on the other hand God calls the Church to *be* one, holy, catholic and apostolic.

1) The Church is One

GIFT: that the Church is one is certainly not a confession made as a result of what man sees of the Church. Unity is hardly evident at all. The fact, then, that Scripture speak of the one-ness of the Church has led many to believe that the Church is a large, invisible entity comprised of all the elect. That one big invisible body would then be the real Church. That makes each local church, each local gathering or assembly, a manifestation of the big thing, the real thing. (This was taught by Abraham Kuyper). This, however, is not what the Lord means when He reveals the Church as one.

Scripture teach that there is but one way to be saved. The angel announced that the coming baby was to be called "*JESUS, for he will save his people from their sins*" (Matthew 1:21). The disciples insisted that "*there is no other name under heaven [than Jesus Christ] given among men by which we must be saved*" (Acts 4:12). As Jesus said, "*I am the way... No one comes to the Father except through Me*" (John 14:6). Yet this same Jesus spoke not of gathering numerous churches, but just one church, "My Church" (one reads in Matthew 16:18), not 'My churches.' Since there is salvation only through Christ alone can there be only **one** Church.

Jesus prayed to the Father concerning the Church, "*I do not pray for these alone, (ie, the disciples) but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that **they all may be one**, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be **one** in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be **one** just as We are one; I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in **one** ...*" (John 17: 20-23). The answer to this prayer of Jesus can be read in Acts 2:44, "*Now all who believed were together, and had all things **in common**,*" and also in Acts 4:32, "*Now the multitude of those who believed were of **one heart and one soul**; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things **in common**.*" There was no division in the early Christian Church, but rather, it was characterised by unity, because there was one Gospel. So we read in Ephesians 4:4, "*There is **one body** and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling.*"

Revelation 14 speaks of the perfect unity which the Church shall enjoy at its completion. "*And they sang as it were a new song before the throne, before the four living creatures, and the elders; and no one could learn that song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who were redeemed from the earth*" (Revelation 14:3). Not only do they sing in unison, but they also confess in unison and together enjoy the Lamb's supper, "*And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunderings, saying, "Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns! ... Let us be glad and rejoice and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his wife has made herself ready. ... Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!"*" (Revelation 19: 6,7,9).

We experience the reality of this gift in the fact that we assemble together in Church on Sundays, singing together, praying together, listening together to the Word, eating together from one bread and drinking from one cup at the Lord's Supper. The communion of saints also gives local expression to the unity of the church. On a broader level, one may think of the bond of churches, as well as sister relations with churches far away. In the closing words of Article 27, "it is joined and united with heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith."

MANDATE: If God has made the Church one, it is the Church's calling to be one. The unity we experience in Church on Sundays, be it by listening together to the one word of life, by praying together or by eating from one bread and drinking from one cup at the Lord's Supper needs constant growth and encouragement. The gift of the communion of saints needs cultivation so that more and more we become an active, living communion, where the one reaches out to the other so that together all members become increasingly unified. On a broader level, the unity of the Church is to be expressed amongst sister churches nationally (synods) and internationally. This is not to be limited to those assemblies that we already know, for the Son of God is continuously at work gathering His Church. Therefore we are to examine whether there are other churches which are true, faithful churches of Christ which we should recognise as such and with whom we should unify.

2) The Church is holy

GIFT: the closing paragraph of Article 27 speaks of "this holy Church". This designation comes from passages of Scripture as 1 Peter 2:9 where we read, "*But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light.*" To be holy means to be set apart, to be regenerated. This is the work of the Holy Spirit. The Church is characterised by holiness because the people gathered into the Church are justified by the blood of Christ and sanctified by the Spirit of Christ. The Church is a gathering of holy people, different, unable to identify with the people on Satan's side.

Paul also speaks of the Church's holiness in his letter to the Ephesians, to whom he writes, "*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might **sanctify and cleanse her** with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish*" (Ephesians 5: 25-27).

MANDATE: The Church is holy. Yet, there is much sin within the Church. I know this by just looking at myself. I am holy, not because of what I do, but because of what the Lord has been pleased to work in me. If God has made me holy, then I am to be holy. This is equally true of the church. This gathering of the believers is to make a point of being holy; we all must make a point of increasingly separating ourselves from sin. God's promise to us then is that we shall increasingly become holy. Ephesians 5:27 speaks of the goal of the pursuit of holiness, namely, that Christ "*might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she **should be holy and without blemish.***" The reference here is to the future. Though by God's work in Jesus Christ the Church is today characterised by holiness, we today are at the same time to work towards that holiness. The Church's holiness is a gift, a reality, and therefore we have a mandate to pursue it.

3) The Church is catholic

GIFT: 'Catholic' means universal, worldwide. In Article 27 we read, "... *this Church is not confined or limited to one particular place or to certain persons, but **is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world.***" That the Church is worldwide is only one notion captured by the word catholic. A second notion this word captures is, as Article 27 states, that the "*Church has existed from the beginning of the world and will be to the end...*" To confess that the Church is catholic is to confess also that the Church is of all times.

We see the evidence of this in Genesis 22:18 where God says to Abraham, "*In your seed **all the nations of the earth** shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.*" The Church is not exclusively for the Jew, the Greek, or the Dutch, but for all nations. See Psalm 87. The Church is for everybody, regardless of race, language, gender, age, social status, etc. In the Revelation to John we read repeatedly, "... *a great multitude which no one could number, **of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues...***" (Revelation 7:9; see 5:9; 15:4). Hence there is no room for discrimination in the Church. "*For by one Spirit we were all baptised into one body -whether **Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free-** and have all been made to drink into one Spirit*" (1 Corinthians 12:13).

The Church's catholicity is a reality. Christ is king over the whole world. However, that does not automatically mean that the Church is to be found everywhere today. For example, prior to the arrival of the Gospel, there was no Church in Australia. A Church was established in Australia after the gospel arrived with the first white people to settle in the country. Hence, if one were to go to the Amazon today, one may or may not find the Church there. To confess that the Church is catholic is to confess that the Church can be everywhere, anywhere. However, that does not mean that today I definitely will find the Church everywhere, anywhere. In fact, it may even happen from time to time that the Church appears to be totally nonexistent - as in the days of "the perilous reign of Ahab." But the catholicity of the Church means that the Church will always be somewhere, be it small, simply because Christ is an eternal King.

MANDATE: If it is a reality that the Church is catholic, that the Church can be anywhere and everywhere in the world, then this reality, this gift implies a mandate to be involved in mission work. If it is a gift of Christ that He has died for all, then the Gospel must also go out to all. A confession of the

Church's catholicity implies a duty to take the Gospel to those who have not heard it as yet. The Free Reformed Church may not seek to remain of Dutch extraction. The Church at Kelmscott too is catholic. On a personal level it implies a duty for me to live a holy life, imaging who my God is to those around me. I am to live, speak and demonstrate in my life who my God is so that in turn many of whatever heritage may be joined to the church. Abraham was called out to be a blessing for all nations.

4) The Church is apostolic

GIFT: In his letter to the Ephesians Paul wrote, "*Now therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, **having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone**" (Ephesians 2:19,20). Likewise, concerning the new Jerusalem, we read in Revelation 21:14, "*Now the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.*" The twelve disciples had seen and heard what Jesus had done and said during His ministry on earth (Acts 1:22; 2:32). They were also equipped by the Holy Spirit to speak the Word of God (John 16:13). They were inspired to do so, but not others.*

The Church is built on the foundation of the apostles. That is: it is characteristic of the Church to embrace whatever the apostles taught. God reveals that the Church holds on to the whole Word of God (see also Article 29: the Church "governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it...).

MANDATE: If the Church is built upon the foundation of the apostles, the Church must also believe what the apostles said, and not teach anything at variance with their teachings. Because embracing the doctrine of the apostles is characteristic of the Church, Paul tells Timothy to "*hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me*" (II Timothy 1:13). Timothy must "*commit*" this truth "*to faithful men who will be able to teach others also*" (II Timothy 2:2). Jude tells his readers to "*contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints*" (vs 3). Were the Church to add to or to subtract from the Gospel as preached by the apostles, it would no longer be the Church. The gift of apostolicity implies the mandate to remain apostolic, fully faithful to God's whole revelation. So the Church must be ever busy with Scripture, always ensuring that she is faithful, reforming.

CONCLUSION

These attributes are part and parcel of what the Church is. In the brokenness of this sinful life, one does not see much of the Church's unity or holiness or catholicity or apostolicity. Yes, the Lord allows us to observe something of it. But even the little we see is marred by sin. It is for the child of God to *believe* what the Lord has said concerning His Church. As we look at the ecclesiastical map today, it is for us to recall what the Lord has said about the Church. Then the sinfulness of this present life jumps at us so clearly, but we remain of good courage. We know: the gates of hell cannot prevail against the Church of Jesus Christ. In the midst of the sinfulness of this life, the Head of the Church continues to gather, defend and preserve His own, till the great day of the marriage feast of the Lamb.

ARTICLE 28

EVERYONE'S DUTY TO JOIN THE CHURCH

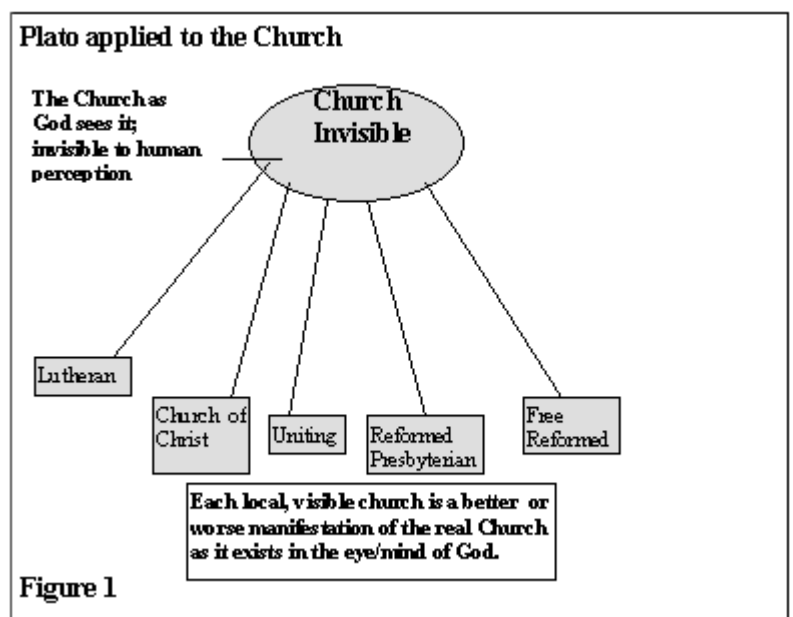
In Article 27 we confessed what we learned from Scripture concerning what the Church was and what her characteristics were. The Church, we confessed, is not the sum total of God's elect, but rather it is the **gathering** of the people of God, the **assembly** of all those saved through Jesus Christ. We also confessed that the church is characterised by four attributes: **1) unity, 2) holiness, 3) catholicity, and 4) apostolicity.**

Article 28 commences with the words, "*We believe, since **this** holy assembly and congregation ...*" Which holy assembly and congregation is referred to here? Could deBres possibly be referring to a Church different from that confessed in Article 27? Is it possible that the church spoken of in Article 27 is a reference to the Church as God sees it, a church invisible to man, and that Article 28 is a reference to the Church as man sees it, a visible church? This distinction between a visible and an invisible church was taught by, amongst others, Abraham Kuyper. It is also widely accepted in our day. However, Article 28 does not allow for such a contrast. Rather, Article 28 speaks of the very same Church as confessed in Article 27 and this is obvious from deBres' use of the pronoun **this** in his opening sentence. The pronoun 'this' indicates something referred to previously. "***This** holy assembly and congregation,*" is not a new or different Church but the very same one spoken of in the last paragraph of Article 27, where we read, "***this** holy Church,*" defined at the beginning of Article 27 as "*a holy congregation and assembly.*" This conclusion is simple a matter of accepted English grammar.

VISIBLE VERSUS INVISIBLE CHURCH: AN UNSCRIPTURAL DISTINCTION

The notion of a visible church versus an invisible church is derived not from Scripture but from the teaching of the Greek philosopher Plato who lived some three or four centuries before Christ. Plato tried to come to grips with the concept of what is real. He reasoned that a real, true impression of things only exists in the mind of God, and that on earth God has made many representations of the real thing. For example, God alone has in mind a real impression of the horse, but on earth there exist many different representations of the real horse, such as the Shetland pony, the Clydesdale, the Percherons, the Quarter horse, the Palomino, etc, each showing to some greater or lesser degree something of the real horse as God alone knows it. Hence, the real horse is not the same as the horse one sees in the paddock. The real horse only exists in God's mind and is invisible to man. Each different kind of horse man sees is merely a better or worse representation of what is in God's mind. We might, for example, judge the Thoroughbred to be a more pure horse than the stout, heavy Clydesdale.

This line of thought was influential in western thinking, and so also received a place in theologians' efforts to understand what the Church was (see Figure 1). Following Plato's reasoning, the real Church was something God alone saw. To man the real Church was invisible; he could only see manifestations of the Church on earth. These manifestations include for example the Lutheran Church, the Church of Christ, the Uniting Church, the Free Reformed Church, the Presbyterian Church, etc. Each of these churches are better or worse representations of the real Church as God alone knows it. They are all churches, but the one church is a closer representation of the real thing than the other. Which church one ought to attend is then made secondary to membership in **the Church**, that body of believers as it



exists in the mind of God.

DENOMINATIONALISM

Each of these different visible manifestations of the Church-as-God-knows-it are called "denominations" and from this is derived the theory of "denominationalism"; this is a theory very much alive today. One could compare this concept of different church denominations to the different denominations of money (that is, as it used to be before coins replaced the paper dollar notes): \$1 note, \$2 note, \$5 note, \$10 note, \$20 note, etc. Although the one denomination is worth more than the other, all denominations are equally real and equally valid. In applying this line of thought to the church, all the different churches are said to be equally valid, but there are differing degrees of purity amongst the churches. The different churches are more or less pure manifestations of the real Church as God alone knows it. One can understand that in such thinking of the church, there is no room left for the notion of the true and false church. As none of the above notes are false notes (though one more desirable than the other), so no church (provided it preaches Christ) can be termed false (though one may be more pure than the next).

Such an understanding of the church has practical implications. It means in practice, for example, that the consistory of the Lutheran Church in the above Figure is able to permit people of the next denominations to participate in their celebration of the Lord's Supper. The criteria for admission to the table of the Lord is then whether or not one is a believer, whether or not one is a member of **THE Church**. Hence also the notion of an open pulpit, where ministers of one denomination are welcomed on the pulpit of the next, for don't all preach the one Gospel? This 'denominationalist' thinking is widespread throughout the evangelical world, and can also be detected within the Free Reformed Churches. Why is it that members feel free to withdraw from church? Why is it that members feel free to go 'church shopping?' At bottom it's because they do not see the Free Reformed Church to be the TRUE church but just one of the many manifestations of THE Church.

THE IDENTITY OF THE CHURCH AS THE ASSEMBLY OF THE REDEEMED OUTSIDE OF WHICH THERE IS NO SALVATION

The Church to which I belong is the very same Church to which Adam, Abraham, Aaron, Augustine, etc, belonged. This is possible because the Church is Catholic, having its beginnings all the way back in Paradise: it "*has existed from the beginning of the world...*" (Article 27). The thought is humbling, and very rich; we are not ecclesiastical orphans in this big world.

In Article 28 deBres echoes the teaching of Scripture that all are called to join this Church and none may not withdraw from it. Says Article 28,

Since:

- 1) the Church "is the assembly of the redeemed," and
- 2) "there is no salvation outside of it,"

therefore:

- 1) "no one ought to withdraw from it," and
- 2) "all and everyone are obliged to join it."

Here is a twofold command to all believers. None may send a letter of resignation to his consistory, and equally, all believers (whether currently separate or in other churches) are to join Christ's Church. This is a comprehensive command to all believers; all must come and join. To add emphasis to this twofold command, deBres concludes this article with this statement, "*All therefore who draw away from the Church or fail to join it act contrary to the ordinance of God.*" DeBres uses strong language here. On what Scriptural grounds was deBres able to confess this in his day? Equally, are we able to defend such a perspective and such strong language in our confession today?

A. THE TWO REALITIES

1) THE CHURCH IS THE ASSEMBLY OF THE REDEEMED: SCRIPTURAL GROUNDS

The following Scriptural arguments may be mentioned in support of the Confession's claim that the Church is the assembly of the redeemed.

i. The Church belongs to God.

Article 28 had begun with describing the Church as "this holy assembly". This description of the Church is an echo of passages of Scripture as Exodus 19:6 ("a holy nation") and I Peter 2:9 (again "a holy nation"). Notice how the apostle applies to the Church of the New Testament the identical title Israel received from God in the Old Testament. This holy nation, washed by the blood of Christ, belongs to God; these are they whom God in Christ has delivered from the power of the devil. That is why the apostle Paul regularly speaks of the congregation as "the church of God." Paul's letters to the Corinthians are addressed to "*the church of God which is at Corinth ...*" (I Corinthians 1:2; see II Corinthians 1:1). This is the normal congregation, with many weaknesses and sins, strongly admonished by the apostle to repent. Yet, because of Christ's work for them, she is addressed as "church of God".

Paul writes to Timothy about how things ought to be done in Church (regarding, for example, the offices in the Church). Timothy is a minister of the Church at Ephesus, minister of a real, local Church, God's house. Writes Paul, "*These things I write to you...so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth*" (1 Timothy 3:14f). This Church in Ephesus, with all its sins and weaknesses, is **God's** house, **God's** dwelling place, **God's** Church. The Church belongs to God; one may therefore not separate the Church from God. When one speaks of the Church one implies God, for the Church is of God. To belong to God means then too that one ought to belong to God's church. The church's identity as church of God requires that one join her.

Since the church is church of God, God joined believers to His church. Peter's preaching after Pentecost was blessed with many converts. The Lord, however, did not let these converts float wherever they would. Scripture tells us rather that "*the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved*" (Acts 2:47). The church to which God joined these new believers was not an invisible Church, but a real, visible entity where the believers "*continued ... in the breaking of bread*" (vs 42). To belong to God, to be one of the redeemed, implies that one also be joined to His Church.

ii. The Brethren desire Togetherness

Psalm 1:5 makes mention of "... *the congregation of the righteous.*" The righteous are not portrayed as so many individuals. They are a body, a group together, 'the congregation of the righteous'. The redeemed wish to be **together**.

This desire receives expression from David in Psalm 16:3. "*As for the saints who are on the earth, They are the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight.*" In unison with David I can say that God is my God and hence I also delight in all who are His, namely the saints. I don't want to be on my own, but I want to be **together** with all God's saints. I want to be close to that in which I delight.

David in Psalm 122:1,2 expressed his eagerness to congregate in the temple. "*I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go into the house of the LORD.' Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem!*" The Temple in Jerusalem foreshadowed the Church of the New Testament, the "*house of God*" (1 Timothy 3:15). I do not want to be isolated from it, on my own, but I want to join it, I want to go there with fellow believers.

iii. Here God meets His people.

Ruth insisted that she accompany Naomi to the Promised Land. She did so because, she said, "*your people shall be my people, and your God, my God*" (1:16). She understood: you cannot separate God from His people. To receive God means that you also receive God's people.

Zechariah 8:23 tells us of the eagerness of the Gentiles to join the Jew. *"Thus says the LORD of hosts: 'In those days ten men from every language of the nations shall grasp the sleeve of a Jewish man, saying 'Let us go **with you, for we have heard that God is with you.**'"* Those who want salvation seek to join the assembly of the redeemed, for that is where God is.

Why do I join the Church? If God is my God, then I want to be with the Church of God. As Calvin once put it, "You cannot have God as your Father if you refuse to have the Church as your Mother."

2) OUTSIDE THE CHURCH THERE IS NO SALVATION: SCRIPTURAL GROUNDS

The second reason mentioned in Article 28 for the prohibition against withdrawal from the Church and the demand to join the Church is the phrase "there is no salvation outside of it." This phrase has been variously interpreted over the years. There have been those who understood the pronoun 'it' to refer to the invisible church, the church as God sees it, all the elect. Then the point of the phrase is that there is no salvation outside the body of the elect; that is: outside the body of the elect none will be saved. So the punch of the phrase becomes that one must make sure that he is elect, is a believer, must come to faith. Yet, since the Confession does not speak of some invisible church (=all the elect), this cannot be the meaning of the phrase.

There have also been those who have understood the phrase to mean that no-one will be saved outside the Church, for believers are only to be found inside the Church (Rev Hoorn in the Netherlands in the early 1980's). This understanding assumes that all the elect are in the local, visible church, that this church equals all the elect. However, with Article 27 we have confessed Scripture to teach that the Church is not all the elect but is rather the **assembly** of the elect. There can, then, definitely be believers, elect persons, outside the church. It is then not correct either to say that one must be a member of Free Reformed Churches in order to be saved. See further the notes on Article 27, page 107, concerning John 10:16.

The point of the phrase 'there is no salvation outside of it' is this: **salvation is not available outside the church.** God has ordained that salvation is made available for mankind not in the bush or on the beach, nor in the flock of a hireling (John 10:12); salvation is available there where Christ is, where His voice is heard. Christ is present in His fold, so that *"My sheep **hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me**"* (John 10:27). To use an example: if one wished to buy a bike, the place to go is the local bike shop. Certainly you don't go to the local bakery to buy a bike. That is: if one wants salvation, there is a place where one is guaranteed to find it, namely, the Church. One can find salvation here because this is where Christ labours. In His Church His voice is heard (in the preaching), and so in His Church the Holy Spirit works faith. If one wants faith, there is a place to go to obtain it.

Again, this is not to say that outside the Church no one will ever be saved. It is quite possible that one will one day find a bike for sale in a bakery. Yet that possibility does not mean that you shop at all the bakeries to find a bike. The Holy Spirit is sovereign, almighty, able to work faith wherever and however He pleases. He has, though, been pleased to bind Himself to particular means of working the faith needed for salvation, and that is through the preaching of the Word. As the apostle says in Romans 10:17, *"So then **faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God**"* (cf Lord's Day 25). It is for us to abide by the means the Lord has revealed to us. If we wish to be saved, we need to adhere to the *norms* of Scripture. That means: we join the Church of Jesus Christ. That's where the Holy Spirit works, that's where salvation is available. It will not do then for me to stay away from Church, or to go to the church of the hireling (much as the hireling may sound like Christ, see John 10:12); rather, I am to do what God wants of me, namely to be in Christ's Church, the 'workshop of the Holy Spirit,' for that is God's norm in bringing His redeemed children to faith.

These two realities lead to two conclusions. Since 1) the church is "the assembly of the redeemed", and 2) "there is no salvation outside of it", two conclusions follow: 1) "no one ought to withdraw from it", and 2) "all and everyone are obliged to join it".

B. THE TWO CONCLUSIONS

1) WITHDRAWAL FROM THE CHURCH IS SIN AGAINST THE SECOND COMMANDMENT

Article 28 concludes as follows, "*All therefore who draw away from the Church or fail to join it **act contrary to the ordinance of God.***" It does not say here that a person who withdraws himself from the Church will be lost and will go to hell. Here deBres is modest about the eternal destiny of those who withdraw from the Church. In keeping with I Corinthians 5:13 ("*But those who are outside God judges*"), deBres makes no comment on whether or not a person who withdraws himself from the Church will be saved. He does, however, say that to withdraw is sin. And sins have consequences.

In the second commandment the Lord God gave this instruction: "*You shall not make for yourself a carved image - any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them...*" Lord's Day 35, Q & A 96, expounds what God requires of us in the second commandment as follows, "*We are not to make an image of God in any way, **nor to worship Him in any other manner than He has commanded in His Word.***"

The Lord is particular about how we should worship Him. To think that God wouldn't mind if I worship Him in the way I choose is to sin against the second commandment, for essentially it is making a mental image of God which does not correspond with Who God has revealed Himself to be, namely, particular about how I worship Him. In the second commandment God goes on to say, "*For I the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me...*" (Deuteronomy 5:9). Who hate the Lord? The reference here is not to the heathen or the harlots, but to who want to serve the Lord but choose to do so in their own, self-chosen manner. To withdraw from the Church is "contrary to the ordinance of God"; it is sin against the second commandment.

Withdrawing from the Church does not automatically make one an unbeliever. Yet it remains true that faith is worked by the Holy Spirit through the preaching. To absent oneself from that preaching means one's faith is no longer fed, and so it will eventually starve and die. Said God to Israel with reference to obedience to His second commandment, "*I...am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the **third and fourth generations.***" My actions today not only affect me, but have implications for my children. If I no longer hear and heed God's Word and Law today, I also deprive my children and grandchildren of hearing God's Word. Withdrawal from the Church is not a decision for the self only, but it has implications for future generations. One need but consider what happened to the many thousands who failed to join the Liberation of 1944. Today, some two generations later, countless descendants of those who submitted to bindings above Scripture officially tolerate the proclamation of gross heresies from their pulpits. On the other hand, God blesses obedience: He shows "*mercy to thousands of those who love Me and **keep My commandments***" (Deuteronomy 5:10).

Yes, one can leave the Church and still be a believer, but then one can no longer count on the blessing of the Lord. God only rewards obedience with His blessing. "*Therefore you shall be careful to do as the LORD your God has commanded you; you shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left. You shall walk in **all** the ways which the LORD your God has commanded you, **that you may live and that it may be well with you, and that you may prolong your days in the land which you shall possess***" (Deuteronomy 5:32,33). God is particular. I may not turn to the right or to the left. I may make no compromises. I may not belittle any of His commandments. I am to do exactly what God has commanded, and only then may I expect God's blessing. "*For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome*" (I John 5:3). To act in a manner consistent with God's will on the matter of the Church requires the obedience of faith.

DeBres saw too that to break with the Church, or to fail to join the Church, is the equivalent of putting one's salvation on the line, even into so many generations. That is why DeBres confesses that one is to join himself to, and to stay joined to God's Church, "*even though the rulers and edicts of princes were against it, and death or physical punishment might follow.*" Why is joining the Church even worth the cost of one's life or physical punishment? It is because, ultimately, one's own (and one's children's) eternal salvation is at stake. The price of withdrawing from the Church is always too high to pay.

2) THE CHURCH AND THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

The consequence flowing from the double reality of 1) the church being "the assembly of the redeemed," and 2) "there is no salvation outside of it", includes more than that "no one ought to withdraw from it". There is also the obligation that "all and everyone" are "to join it".

Joining the Church involves more than getting your name on a membership list. Certainly that is part of it. Joining oneself to the Church is something one does Sunday by Sunday, by being in Church when the Word is preached. In Hebrews 10:25 we are exhorted, "... *not forsaking **the assembling of ourselves together**, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.*" Soon Christ shall return, there isn't much time left, and it is for me to be there where salvation through Him alone is preached.

Again, there is more to Church membership than filling my spot on the pew each Sunday. Church membership also implies an active involvement on the part of each member. Says deBres: The members "*must submit themselves to (the Church's) instruction and discipline, bend their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ, and serve **the edification of the brothers and sisters, according to the talents which God has given them as members of the same body.***" Scripture compares the Church, the body of believers, to a physical body where all members of the body are dependent upon each other. One reads of this in 1 Corinthians 12:12, "*For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many are one body, so also is Christ.*" Each member needs the other. Each member knows that he needs the other members and that they need him.

The communion of saints is part and parcel of being Church. Said Paul to the Corinthians, "*Now you (the saints of Corinth, the Corinthian Church), are **a body of Christ, and members individually***" (1 Corinthians 12:27. (Note: the Greek text does not have the definite article 'the' here). That is: the church of Corinth is a complete body, with each member needing every other member. So each believer in Corinth was to make a point of being actively involved in the body, for mutual benefit and personal advantage. Likewise, the Church at Kelmscott today is a complete body of Christ, and so is also to be a body, to be a communion of saints together, where each member is there for the other and where each member is dependent upon the other. It will not do for me therefore to distance myself from the congregation. After all, isn't David's delight in the communion of saints, his delight in the togetherness of the saints, also my delight? (Psalm 16, Psalm 122). Hence I delight in congregating with the saints Sunday by Sunday, and I give myself in service to the saints all the time.

ARTICLE 29

THE MARKS OF THE TRUE AND FALSE CHURCH

Like its preceding articles, Article 29 commences its very first sentence with the words "*we believe.*" These two words are of significance, for they shed a particular light on the meaning of the rest of the sentence and article. That is: the material of Article 29, including its lines of thought, are items revealed in Scripture and therefore embraced by faith. The question is not what one sees or thinks; the question is rather: what is God's revelation?

THE NEED FOR DISCERNING WHAT THE TRUE CHURCH IS

The believer confesses in Article 29 that "*we ought to discern diligently and very carefully from the Word of God what is the true Church.*" Two reasons may be given for this need to "discern diligently and very carefully."

1. The first has already been confessed in Article 28. That article had given expression to the teaching of the Lord that "*all and everyone are obliged to join [the church] and unite with it.*" Two reasons in turn had been given in Article 28 as to why one needed to join the church:
 - i. "*since this holy assembly and congregation is the assembly of the redeemed, all the redeemed ought to join it;*
 - ii. "*there is no salvation outside of it.*"

These elements of God's revelation point up the need to join the church.

2. However, in the brokenness of life, there are so many gathering who call themselves churches while in fact they have no right to the term. As Article 29 says it: "*all sects which are in the world today claim for themselves the name of Church.*" We see it in our local community. One finds, for example, the Uniting Church, the Anglican Church, The Church of Christ, the Free Reformed Church, the Westminster Presbyterian Church.

Having confessed with Article 28 that I must join the Church, how then, from all these 'churches,' do I discern which is THE church I must join? In order to do that I need the instruction of the Word of God. On the basis of the Word of God alone am I able to discern what the Church is, and so determine where it is that I belong and to which Church I must therefore join myself.

ALL MUST JOIN THE CHURCH; THEREFORE I TOO MUST JOIN THE CHURCH

With Article 28 I confess that I must **join** the Church. As things have turned out for me (and for many of us), the fact that I am a member of one of the Free Reformed Churches today is not so much due to the fact that I **joined** this Church, but rather, is due to the fact that I **was joined** to this Church. I was born, baptised and raised in the Free Reformed Churches. Yet the Confession speaks of a *decision* when it speaks of joining. **Why** am I Free Reformed? Is it because I was born and raised as 'Free Reformed', because my parents go to a 'Free Reformed' Church, because I developed friendships with other 'Free Reformed' people and feel comfortable with them? Or am I a member of the Free Reformed Church because I'm convinced that **the Lord has called me** to the Free Reformed Church, because I'm convinced that this is where the marks of the true Church are found and therefore I **must** go to this Church out of **obedience** to God? This latter is the only legitimate reason, the only good reason before God, for being Free Reformed. It is on the basis of the Word of God alone that I am to determine which is the true Church. Only on the basis of Scripture can I justify my church membership.

Knowing from the Word of God what the Church is, and being called by God's Word to join the Church, it follows that I must therefore discern between the many churches I see around me as to which church is indeed Christ's Church. I may not belong to a church because I feel comfortable there, or because I was born into that church; rather, I must make a point of joining that Church where Christ wants me to.

THE THREE MARKS OF THE TRUE CHURCH

Having to describe things as 'true' is only necessary when counterfeit replicas of them also exist. For example, by definition money is real. When the teller gives you change, immediately question whether or not it is real tender. One assumes it is real, and spends it until it should be proven to be fake. Likewise, by definition the Church is true; one doesn't think of it as being false. That the Church is true is something one takes for granted. Adding the word 'true' to the word 'church' does not alter the meaning of the word 'church'. Therefore, in speaking of the *'true Church,'* Article 29 is making a confession concerning the very same concept of church as confessed in articles 27 and 28. The 'true' Church of Article 29 is the Church of Article 27 and of Article 28.

Article 29 describes the marks of that very same Church:

"The true Church is to be recognised by the following marks:

- 1) It practises the pure preaching of the gospel;*
- 2) It maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them.*
- 3) It exercises Church discipline for correcting and punishing sins."*

1) The pure preaching of the gospel

Note well that the true Church is not characterised by preaching, but by **PURE** preaching. To hear the pure preaching of the Gospel is the equivalent of hearing the voice of Christ. The voice of Christ will not twist, omit, or add to what is written in the Bible. If Christ speaks, one hears *what is found in the Bible*. Why is it important for me to be in the Church where Christ speaks? It is because that is where salvation is available to me; that is where I hear pure preaching of the gospel.

Of all the churches I find in my community, how am I to discern which of these has the pure preaching? To discern this I am to look at the pulpit. I need to learn whether what is said from the pulpit is truly scriptural. From what I hear from the pulpit, do I recognise the voice of Christ?

In John 10:11,12 the shepherd and the hireling are contrasted, the one concerned for the well being of his sheep (even to the point of sacrificing his own life for the sheep), while the other's primary concern is his own well being. Said Jesus, *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them."* It is imperative therefore for the sheep to be able to discern between the shepherd and the hireling. How do the sheep know that they are indeed following the shepherd and not the hireling? Said Jesus, *"I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and **am known** by My own"* (John 10:14). How do the sheep know the Shepherd? *"My sheep **hear My voice**, and I know them, and they follow Me"* (John 10:27). Here Jesus repeats what He said in the verses 3 and 4 of the same chapter, namely, *"... and the sheep **hear (the shepherd's) voice**; and **he calls** his own sheep by name and leads them out. And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they **know his voice**."*

Where is the Good Shepherd's voice heard? It is heard in the Church. To hear the preaching of the Word of God is to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd. This Word calls me to join that Church where Christ the Good Shepherd is the Head of the Church, where His Word is the final authority.

2) The pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them

The sacraments are the visible preaching of the Word of God; preaching made clear to the eyes in order to underline, illustrate, the message that is heard. Pure administration of the sacraments, then, points also to Christ's presence. (The Confession deals with the sacraments in Articles 33-35).

3) Church discipline is exercised for correcting and punishing sins

The Good Shepherd, motivated by love for His sheep, reaches out to His sheep when they go astray. He seeks them out so that He might lead them back to His fold. The Shepherd loves His sheep so much that He even laid down His life for them. If I don't listen to Christ my Shepherd, if I don't want to hear His voice, He disciplines me out of love. His motive is to bring me back to Him so that I may live within the safety of His fold, His Church, for that is where He offers me salvation.

All together, then, the three marks speak of the Christ's pastoral care for His people. Article 29 summarises these three marks of the true Church as follows, "*In short, (the true Church) governs itself according to the Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and regarding Jesus Christ as the only Head.*" The presence of these three marks in a church testifies to the fact that Christ is the Head of that Church. If Christ is there, then His whole Word will be the final authority in every question.

In discerning which church I must join, it is *not* for me to look at the people attending a given church. All people that attend church are in need of the forgiveness of sins, today, tomorrow, next week, next year. If I am to use people as my criteria for finding the church, I will never find it. A church is essentially a gathering of believers who know themselves, on account of sin, dependent on Jesus Christ for salvation (see Article 27). Hence I expect to find sinners in church, people with many faults. In the one gathering I may well find better people than in another. However, the decisive factor is whether the preaching is Scriptural. Is the Word of God the ONLY and FINAL authority in this gathering? If I can answer this question in the affirmative, I am to join that Church.

THE CHRISTIAN

One could consider deBres' confession concerning the Christian to be better placed in Article 24, for isn't the Christian the result of the renewing, sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit? However, in view of the confession that the Church is the assembly of believers, a confession concerning the marks of the Christian is well placed in Article 29. One cannot separate Christians from the Church, nor can one separate the Church from Christians. The mere presence of Christians does not make an assembly a true Church; rather, the point is that in the true Church are Christians. After all, the Word of God is not proclaimed where there are none chosen to life.

In his description of the Christian, deBres uses very absolute terminology. How does one recognise a Christian?

1. "*They believe in Jesus Christ the only Saviour.*" All Christians have the same Christ in common. There are not multiple Christs, and therefore not multiple faiths in Christ either.
2. Christians "*flee from sin.*" One does not flee from an angry dog at a relaxed, sauntering pace. To flee means to run, to dash, to make a desperate effort to get away from lurking danger. This is also the Christian's reaction in the face of sin. The Christian does not loiter in the presence of sin. The Christian knows his own vulnerability (Lord's Day 52.127), and so aggressively puts distances himself and sin.
3. Christians "*pursue righteousness.*" The Christian is not blasè about righteousness, does not reach for it in a non-committed fashion. Pursuit speaks of action. When in pursuit of something one is at work, doing something, chasing after something. With strong, and even aggressive, determination the Christian strives to reach the goal of righteousness.
4. Christians also "*love God and their neighbour without turning to the right or left.*" Obedience to God is to follow the straight path of obedience without tolerating any straying. Said God to Israel when He gave to them His commandments, "*... you shall be careful to do as the LORD your God has commanded you; you shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left*" (Deuteronomy 5:32). There is absolutely no room for 'give and take,' no room for any compromise.
5. Christians "*crucify their flesh and its works.*" Crucifixion is not a small measure of self-denial. Crucifixion: whatever is hung on a cross most certainly dies. Here is an absolute description of the Christian's response to sin: the Christian is serious about his hatred of and his fight against sin. This does

not negate the fact that there remains much weakness in the Christian (see Article 24). Yet, the Christian does actively fight against his remaining weaknesses and shortcomings, constantly looking to Christ in confident assurance that with Him alone is light and salvation.

Where does one find Christians? Where should one find Christians? Christians are found in the (true) Church, as a result of the pure preaching of the gospel, as a result of hearing Christ's voice. It is in Church that Christ and the Holy Spirit are at work. In discerning which church is the true Church one does not first look at the person in the pew and then attend to what is heard from the pulpit. Rather, one must first attend to what is heard from the pulpit. It is from the pulpit that Christ is preached, and such preaching finds its results in the pew: Christians.

THE FALSE CHURCH

To add the word false to the word church does add something to the notion of Church. One assumes that the Church is true until it is detected to be false (just as one assumes money is real until it is proven to be counterfeit). To precede the word 'church' with 'false' is the equivalent of saying: here is a gathering which calls itself church while in fact it is not a church.

To say that a church is false does not mean that the people of that church are all going to hell. That is not what Scripture says. Article 28 confessed on the basis of Scripture that those who do not join themselves to the true Church "*act contrary to the ordinance of God.*" This is not the same as saying they will not be saved.

The adjective 'false' captures the notion that something is illegitimate, illegal, counterfeit. Satan likes to imitate what God does (2 Corinthians 11:14). God gathers His Church, so Satan also gathers a church. Satan's church looks and sounds much like God's Church. Satan's church is no more 'church' than counterfeit money is money. Satan's church is illegitimate in God's eyes, illegal, counterfeit. Can the Lord possibly be pleased when besides the Church where Christ is Sovereign there appears another assembly of believers where Christ is not Sovereign, but which instead is led by a hireling?! Such a church is a false church, illegitimate, counterfeit.

The Scriptures give a couple of examples of false, illegitimate, counterfeit assemblies. In Numbers 16 one reads of Israel, God's assembly, where God was recognised as the final authority. The assembly of the people under the leadership of Moses and Aaron was legitimate before God, for God Himself had ordained Moses and Aaron, regulated that assembly. The chapter tells us, though, of a second assembly, under the self-appointed leadership of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. Here is a second assembly over against the first, a second church. The one recognised the Lord God as Head, while the other did not recognise God as the final authority in all things. The one assembly/church, was legitimate in God's eyes and survived; the other was illegitimate and went down into the pit. Scripture does not say of those who died whether they went to heaven or not. What is clear from Numbers 16 is that God's judgement rests upon a church which is false, illegitimate.

One finds another example of a false church in 1 Kings 12. Jeroboam had become king of the ten northern tribes of Israel. God's instruction to Israel was that they were to worship Him in Jerusalem. Jeroboam, placing political expedience ahead of obedience to God, closed the borders between Israel and Judah and established sanctuaries of worship in Dan and Bethel. This way his subjects could not be tempted to defect to Rehoboam, king of the two tribes of Judah in the south, when they travelled to Jerusalem to worship. Jeroboam made two golden calves and said to the people, "*It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt*" (1 Kings 12:28,29). Or, as can equally be translated (for the word 'god' is always in plural form in the Hebrew language): "*Here is your God, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt*".

What is important to note here is that Jeroboam did not want to serve other gods. He too wanted to continue serving the God of Israel. The point is rather, that he wanted to serve God differently than God had commanded. For example, in Leviticus 23:33 one reads, "*Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to the children of Israel saying: 'The fifteenth day of this **seventh** month shall be the Feast of*

Tabernacles for seven days to the LORD." What did Jeroboam do? "*Jeroboam ordained a feast on the fifteenth day of the **eight** month, like the feast that was in Judah*" (1 Kings 12:32). Furthermore, God had ordained the Levites to make the sacrifices in the Temple. However, Jeroboam ignored this. Instead, "**he made shrines on the high places, and made priests from every class of people, who were not of the sons of Levi.** ... So he did at Bethel, sacrificing to the calves that he had made. And at Bethel **he installed the priests of the high places which he had made**" (1 Kings 12:31,32). Not only did Jeroboam take upon himself an authority that was not his, ie, he made priests rather than accepting the officebearers ordained by God Himself, but he also made priests from any tribe of Israel when God had specified they should be from the tribe of Levi. Here is a service of God, according to self-chosen standards.

The people did serve God, but they did not serve where He wanted to be served nor did they serve Him in the way He wanted to be served. Jeroboam did not let God have the final authority, and hence the gathering of people in Bethel was illegitimate in God's eyes. The illegitimacy (in God's eyes) of the Bethel sanctuary was pointed up by the words spoken by the man of God against Jeroboam's self-styled worship. This man of God "*gave a sign the same day saying, "This is the sign which the LORD has spoken: Surely the altar shall split apart, and the ashes on it shall be poured out"*" (I Kings 13:3). The prophet spoke the Word of God and God's words are never empty or powerless. What God says always comes true, also concerning His judgement on this illegitimate church. In I Kings 13:5 one reads, "*The altar also was split apart, and the ashes poured out from the altar, according to the sign which the man of God had given by the word of the LORD.*" Here was evidence of God's displeasure on this illegitimate assembly of His people.

In 1 Kings 12 we have a clear example of what it is deBres says concerning the false church in Article 29. "*The false church **assigns more authority to itself and its ordinances than to the Word of God.** It does not want to submit itself to the yoke of Christ.... It bases itself more on men than on Jesus Christ. It **persecutes those who live holy lives according to the Word of God and who rebuke the false church for its sins, greed and idolatries.**" What was Jeroboam's response to the words of the prophet? Having been rebuked on account of his church's "*sins, greed and idolatries*" Jeroboam responds by calling for the prophet's arrest (1 Kings 12:4). Here is an example of persecution of those "*who live holy lives according to the Word of God and rebuke the false church.*"*

In two of His seven letters to the churches of Asia Minor, Jesus Christ makes mention of "the synagogue of Satan" (Revelation 2:9; 3:9). The reference is to a gathering of persons in the name of God that is obviously so degenerate as to be unmistakably the work of Satan. Not every false church is equally corrupt (as also not every true church is equally 'pure'). However, it is not the amount of perversion in a church that determines whether it is false. A church is false, illegitimate before God, when it does not want to bow before the Word of God. In its extreme form such a church may very unmistakably be a synagogue of Satan.

TRUE AND FALSE CHURCHES: EASILY DISTINGUISHABLE

Having commenced Article 29 with the words, "*we believe,*" deBres makes the following conclusion concerning the Church and the counter church, the True Church versus the false church. "*We believe ... (that) these two churches are **easily recognised and distinguished** from each other.*" With these words I confess to believe that Scripture tells me that it is clear which church is the true Church. One might question whether it was really that clear to the Israelites in the days of Numbers 16 whether or not the church of Korah, Dathan and Abiram was the true Church. Was it clear to them whether they should remain with the assembly of Moses and Aaron or join that of Korah, Dathan and Abiram? Was it clear in the days of Jeroboam if the church he set up was a true church? After all, he did promote the worship of the God who delivered Israel from Egypt. In the brokenness of life, with emotional ties and family ties clouding the issue, it may well seem difficult to determine which is the true church. Yet for us today it is not at all difficult to determine whether the people of Israel should join themselves to the assembly of Moses or the assembly of Korah.

In the midst of much strife, in the midst of being confused perhaps by what I see and hear of the many different churches around me, or by the way my emotions tend to lead me, I believe that it is not so

difficult to discern what is the True Church. Today it is clear to me who I should have sided with if I lived in the days of Numbers 16 or in the days of Jeroboam. Why is this clear? It is clear because the only criteria by which this could be discerned was whether or not the Word of God was proclaimed and submitted to. It was doctrinal error that made the false church stand apart from the true Church. Hence today too it need not be that difficult to discern which church is legitimate in God's eyes.

THE CHALLENGE POSED BY ARTICLE 29

Article 29 challenges me to ask myself where I might find the true Church in Kelmscott. In which church do I belong? Where is it that God wants me to be? Am I convinced that in the Church where I am currently a member the Word of God is the final authority? If I am not convinced, I have a task ahead of myself. That is: I need to call the brethren to repentance. If they refuse to submit to the Word of God, it is for me to leave, to find and join myself to the true church.

However, if I am convinced that I am joined to the Church to which God calls me; if by the grace of God His Word is indeed the final authority in the Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott, then I must ensure that it remains that way. I cannot assume that it will just automatically remain that way, for the Church of today is not necessarily the same as the Church of tomorrow. Things can change, for the members of the Church are all sinful. The important question to ask when evaluating whether or not the Church one belongs to is true is whether the members continue to recognise the voice of Christ and humbly bow to it. This cannot be taken for granted. It requires much struggling and attentiveness to be and remain true Church.

My Church membership is to be a conscious decision on my part. I must discern that this is the true Church, and if so, therefore I join it and therefore I may not withdraw from it. Birth, baptism or friendships are no valid grounds on which to base Church membership. The Church I am joined to is only legitimate, is only a true Church, when the voice of Christ is heard from its pulpit.

ARROGANT?

If I have discerned 'my' Church to be the true Church, then this must also be the Church to which all must join themselves, as I confessed in Article 28. In practice: if I must, on the basis of Scripture, call the Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott the true church of town, then all Christians in town are duty bound before God to join this true Church, the Free Reformed Church. This may indeed sound arrogant and haughty to the human ear. But what really is arrogance, haughtiness? That one would rise up against Scripture, speak against it, act contrary to it, fail to submit to it - isn't that arrogance? If Christ says, "My people are to obey My voice," may I then say that I find that too restrictive and then go ahead and do what I think is better? It takes humility to respond and say, "Yes, I believe it," and then act accordingly. To say that the Church I belong to is the true Church, to say that the Free Reformed Church is the true Church, is not arrogant, but is an act of humble obedience to Scripture. If God's Word is the final authority in the Church I belong to, then in spite of the fact that there may also be Christians in the church down the road, I am to humbly accept that this Church to which I belong is THE Church of Christ with which I and all believers must be united.

More, if God has already sovereignly joined me to His Church (= the true Church) in Kelmscott, there is room on my part only for deep thankfulness. Who am I that the Lord should join *me* to His Church?! This is mercy, and it leads to such thankfulness that I join the call of the Bible to others of town also to join this church, Christ's Church.

ARTICLE 30

THE GOVERNMENT OF THE CHURCH

"We believe that **this true Church** must be governed according to the Spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in His Word." By the phrase "this true Church" deBres reaches back to the Church as confessed in the Articles 27-29, namely, the gathering of the people of God (Article 27) which all are obliged to join to receive salvation (Article 28) and of which Christ is the acknowledged Head (Article 29). That Church, we confess in Article 30, is to be governed in a particular way. Just as Article 27's confession of what the Church is is a matter of faith (for the Bible alone teaches us what the Church is), so Article 30's confession concerning the government of the Church is a matter of faith. For the Church is God's, and hence the Lord alone can determine how she is to be governed. So this article commences with the words, "We **believe that this true Church must be governed according to the Spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in His Word.**"

THE CHURCH IS A CHRISTOCRACY

The Church is not a group of like-minded people, and hence the Church is not ruled according to the personal wishes of its members. It is not a democracy where the people rule. The Church is not a social organisation either where the highest social rank rules. It is not an aristocracy where the aristocrats rule. Rather, the Church is a Christocracy where the Christ rules. The appendix '-cracy' comes from the Greek word for 'rule'. Hence a Christocracy is a system of government where Christ rules.

The Church belongs to Christ and hence must be governed by Christ. This is the fundamental thought which underlies Article 30. In studying Article 30 one must take into account that Christ is the Head of the Church. Consequently, the Church is not ruled according to human standards, wishes or whims, but according to the Word of Christ. In His Word God has taught us how things ought to be done in Church. Hence our article's use of the words "*Spiritual order.*" Church government is not a human system but a spiritual system. This means too that the Church is not governed by human force and compulsion, but rather by persuasion on the basis of the Word of God.

OFFICE BEARERS: CHRIST'S GIFTS TO THE CHURCH

Christ after His triumph on the cross (where He purchased the Church for Himself with His own blood) has ascended into Heaven. His physical absence, though, does not mean that Christ has deserted His Church. Rather, from Ephesians 4 we learn that Christ, when He ascended into Heaven, gave gifts to His Church. "*But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore he says: "When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men"* (Ephesians 4:7,8). As to what these gifts were, we read in the same chapter, "*And He Himself gave some to be **apostles**, some **prophets**, some **evangelists**, and some **pastors and teachers**"* (4:11). Christ's purpose in giving these particular gifts, office bearers, to His Church was "*for the **equipping** of the saints for the work of ministry, for the **edifying** of the body of Christ"* (4:12). In His good pleasure the Lord is pleased to rule over and care for His bride by means of officebearers. These men, though sinful and needing forgiveness in the blood of Christ as much as any other, are "God's fellow workers" (1 Corinthians 3:9; 2 Corinthians 6:1).

Ephesians 4 mentions the following offices:

1. Apostles: this was a temporary office in the New Testament Church, filled by Paul and the twelve apostles, who were not replaced after they died. Characteristic of the office of apostle was that these apostles were eye witnesses of the resurrected Christ (cf Acts 1:22).
2. Prophets: this too was a short-term office which existed in the time when the New Testament Scripture was not yet completed. For example, in Acts 21:10 we read of "... a certain prophet named Agabus" See also I Corinthians 12:28. This office has disappeared with the completion of the Scripture.
3. Evangelists: another temporary office. Examples of evangelists in the New Testament are Philip

(Acts 21:8) and Timothy (1 Timothy 4:5). The exact nature of this office seems harder to define, but must be understood in the context of the missionary expansion of the early church.

4. Pastors and Teachers: this is the only office which continues, since its institution in Paul's days, throughout the course of the New Testament Church. In Acts 20 we read of Paul calling together the elders of the Church at Ephesus. *"From Miletus he (Paul) sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church"* (Acts 20:17). In verse 28 Paul gives them the following charge, *"Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood."* The words used in Ephesians 4 for 'pastor' appears in Acts 20 in the instruction to the elders. See also I Peter 5:1f.

OFFICE BEARERS: SERVANTS OF CHRIST, SERVANTS OF CHRIST'S CHURCH

Today too, the Lord is pleased to rule His Church through pastors and teachers. They are gifts to the Church from the ascended Christ. It is for the very reason that they are Christ's gifts to the Church that office bearers are not permitted to rule the Church in a self chosen manner. By definition, office bearers are servants of Christ, the Head of the Church. As Christ laid down His life in order to serve the Church, purchasing her with His own blood, so too, in serving Christ, must the office bearers give of themselves in order to serve the Church. The Church is not there for the sake of the office bearers, but the office bearers are there for the sake of the Church. 1 Peter 5:1-4: *"The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, **servi**ng as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; **nor as being lords** over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away."*

This principle of office bearers serving the Church determines not only the manner in which office bearers must perform their task within the congregation; this principle determines too how the congregation in turn must receive these brothers. The office bearers are to be honoured in view of Whom it is that they represent, namely, the Christ. In the office bearers the Christ Himself comes to His people. *"Remember those who rule over you, **who have spoken the word of God** to you ..."* (Hebrews 13:7). It is on account of the Word, Christ's Word, which the office bearers speak, that they are to be respected. Therefore Hebrews 13:17 exhorts on the same basis, *"Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls as those who must give account...."* It is Christ who gives the office bearers the charge to tend the flock that is in their charge. To disregard the officebearers is to disregard the Christ who sends them.

Hence the home visit by the elders is not so much a visit by just two people, but rather it is Christ who comes in the person of the elder. If Christ sends the elder, it means that I must accept him because of Who his Sender is: Christ. That means too that if the elders visit me, I must be open with them. After all, Christ knows my thoughts, what goes on in my life, my family, my home. It is through the office bearers that Christ seeks to encourage me in my particular circumstances. Hence I must be open in my communication to my elders so that they may know in which way they might best encourage, or if necessary, admonish me. So the question of whether or not I like a particular elder, or get on with my elders, is not to be the criteria by which I decide how I shall receive them. My openness to them is not to be determined by who the elders are, but rather, by Who it is that sent them to me.

Since it is Christ who sends the elders, they are not to carry out their office or make their visits in order to satisfy personal egos or as a means to finding out as much gossip as they can concerning the members of the Church. Office bearers must carry out their task in the Church in full awareness of the fact that they are ambassadors of Christ.

That office bearers are gifts of Christ means too that office bearers are not my representatives. Unlike a democracy in which the people elect for themselves a representative to Parliament, trusting that that person will speak on behalf of their interests, office bearers are not representatives of the people. Rather, office bearers are representatives of Christ and must therefore speak Christ's Word at all times. Office bearers are not called to speak what I want to hear. I, a sinner, am too sinful even to know what is good

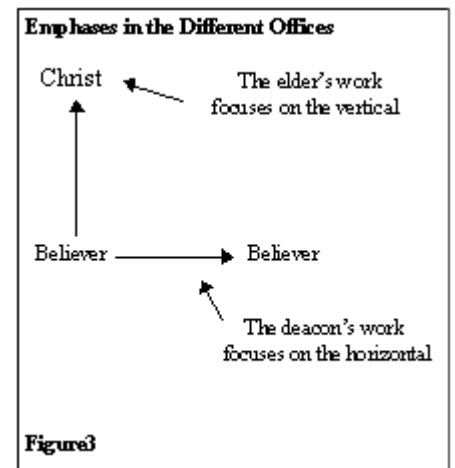
God and the believer ('supervising the "doctrine and conduct" of the ministers') and between the believer and God.

2) DEACONS:

In both the Old and New Testaments God instructs His people to show mercy to each other, and in so doing, to reflect the love of the Father and of the Son. Today too it is the task of all members of the congregation to look after the other. The communion of saints is there so that all the saints see to the well being of each other. *"Also today the Lord calls on us to show hospitality, generosity, and mercy, so that the weak and needy may share abundantly in the joy of God's people. No one in the congregation of Christ may live uncomforted under the pressure of sickness, loneliness, and poverty"*

(Book of Praise, p. 631).

"For the sake of this (above-mentioned) service of love (by members of the congregation amongst each other), Christ has given deacons to His church." Deacons are *"to see to the good progress of this service of charity in the church"* (Book of Praise, p. 631; see also Article 21 of the Australian Church Order). The task of the deacons, therefore, focuses on the relations between the members of the congregation, between the believer and his fellow believer. It is the responsibility of the individual Church members to be busy serving each other in love and it is the duty of the deacons to see to it that this is indeed done. The deacons are to ensure that the communion of saints is functioning well within the congregation. So, while the focus of the Elders' work lies on the vertical plane, the focus of the Deacons' work lies on the horizontal plane (see Figure 3).



In order to fulfil their task, it is expedient for the deacons to visit all in the congregation, in order to ascertain which members have particular needs as well as to find out what gifts members have to offer for the benefit of another. *"They shall acquaint themselves with existing needs and difficulties."* At the same time, they are to *"exhort the members of Christ's body to show mercy"* (Book of Praise, p. 631). Each of us is to ask ourselves what it is that I am doing for the communion of saints, what is it that I could give to another, what it is I could do to improve the communion of saints in the Church of which I'm a member.

NOTE: it is to be understood that the scheme of Figure 3 is not to be understood in absolute terms. A problem between believers (on the horizontal plane) surely has a spiritual dimension (involving the elders). And a warped relation between a congregation member and God (vertical dimension) will affect that member's attitude and conduct toward his fellow member (horizontal dimension). Nevertheless, this scheme does make clear where the *accents* of the tasks of the respective offices lies. See further Acts 6:1-7.

ARTICLE 31

THE OFFICERS OF THE CHURCH

Whereas the focus of Article 30 was that Christ rules His Church by the gifts of office bearers, Article 31 makes a confession concerning how it is that Christ calls individual people to office. Thereafter, Article 31 makes confession concerning the relation between the officebearers.

OFFICEBEARERS RECEIVE THEIR AUTHORITY FROM CHRIST

Having been accused by the Church at Corinth that he was not qualified to be an apostle, that he was 'double-tongued,' a pseudo apostle, unreliable, Paul replies by saying, "*For the love of Christ compels us*" (2 Corinthians 5:14). To be 'compelled' speaks of force. It was Christ, in His love for the Church, Who forced Paul into the office of apostle. See Acts 9 concerning: Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. Just as Paul was compelled to become an apostle, so brothers in the congregation are compelled to become office bearers. It is Christ who *puts* people in their office. This is also the sentiment expressed in Acts 20:28 where Paul, in addressing the elders of Ephesus, says, "*Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which **the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which he purchased with His own blood***" (Acts 20:28). These elders had been acted upon; they had been placed in their office. It is the Lord who appoints people to an office in His Church and to this end He uses the congregation.

THE CONGREGATION'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE APPOINTMENT OF OFFICE BEARERS

Guido deBres wrote Article 31 in a particular context. On the one hand he was surrounded by Anabaptists who promoted a rather spiritualistic teaching with regard to the appointment to office. According to them one received a personal revelation from God, perhaps through a dream, to the effect that God called to an office. The person concerned would then insist to the congregation that they had to receive him, on the basis of the call he felt in his heart. In opposition to this subjective and spiritualist approach, deBres confessed in Article 31 that "*we believe that ministers, elders, and deacons ought to be **chosen** to their offices ...*" There is no room for claiming an office on the basis of private feelings.

On the other hand there were in deBres' day also the Roman Catholics who practised an unscriptural method of obtaining office bearers. Bishops of a particular locality took it upon themselves as their duty to meet together and decide who should be the priest of a given church. DeBres therefore insists that office bearers "*ought to be chosen to their offices **by lawful election of the Church ...***"

That the congregation is to be involved in the calling of brothers to office is something we learn from Scripture. When, after Christ's ascension, a replacement was sought for Judas Iscariot (who had committed suicide), Peter and the other disciples, together with the whole congregation, participated in the procedure of isolating Matthias for the office. We read in Acts 1 the following, "*And **they** (the 120 brethren) **prayed** and **they cast their lots**, and the lot fell on Matthias.. And he was numbered with the eleven apostles"* (Acts 1:24-26). That the congregation was involved was also the case in Acts 6:3-7. Having been instructed by the apostles to select seven men from among them, we read, "*And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And **they chose** Stephen ... Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, ... whom **they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed**, they laid hands on them."*

Important to note here too is that prayer was very much a part of the election procedure. The fact that the Lord calls people to a particular office in His Church, and uses the congregation as His means for indicating the brother(s) of His choice, makes prayer mandatory for the congregation. The congregation (entire, not just the men!) are to beseech the Lord to show for whom one should vote, are to implore the Lord to indicate who it is that He wishes to use as officebearer in His Church.

That the Lord involves the congregation in the process of indicating the brothers He is pleased to use, is the result of the out pouring of the Holy Spirit on all believers; all believers have received insight and discretion. All should therefore also get involved in the process of appointing brothers in the congregation

to serve as office bearers. I too have received the Holy Spirit and therefore it is also for me to get involved. Which brothers do I think satisfy the criteria for office bearers as stipulated in passages of Scripture as 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1? It is not a question of who I *like* best, but rather, who can best *represent Christ*, speak His Word to His people. Having come up with the name of one or more brothers, I submit these to consistory (complete with reason why the brother is suitable). From the list of brothers short listed by Consistory, I prayerfully decide for whom it is that I am to vote.

A brother's subsequent election to office is to be recognised as a gift from God, by both the brother concerned and the congregation at large. One is not called to office due to any inherent gifts he may have, but purely because *God calls*. The fact that God calls to office demands humility on the part of the called. It also calls for dependence on the Lord that He will give the wisdom required to function in office. Whether or not one feels capable, one is to go forward in faith, trusting in God. Consider the reluctance of Moses to serve as God's ambassador to Pharaoh, and God's words of encouragement to him in Exodus 4:1-17.

EQUALITY AMONG THE OFFICE BEARERS

All office bearers in a given congregation are equal in authority. This equality is rooted in Jesus' words in Matthew 23:1-11. Speaking to the multitudes and the disciples, Jesus said concerning the Scribes and Pharisees, *"The scribes and Pharisees...love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the market places, and to be called by men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi.'" But Jesus' instruction to the disciples is, "But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for one is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren" (vs 8) and "he who is greater among you shall be your servant" (vs 11). Christ has not instituted any ranking amongst the offices. Each office bearer is equal to the other*

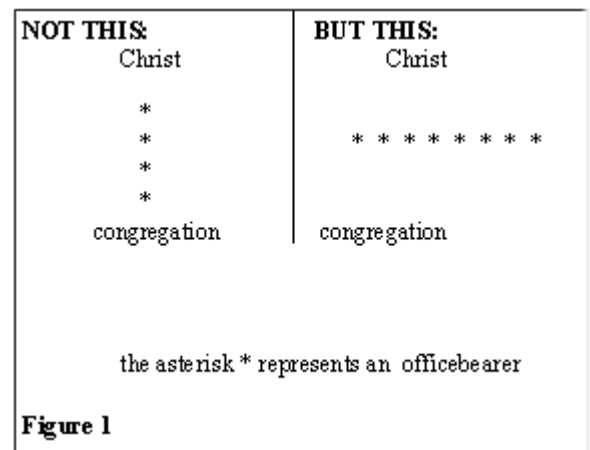
(See Figure 1). No one has more authority than another, despite the fact that one office bearer may have more gifts than another. Of him who has more gifts, God also requires more, but that does not make one more important than another. Therefore we also confess with Article 31, *"Ministers of the Word, in whatever place they are, have **equal** power and authority, for they are all servants of Jesus Christ."* This leaves no room for the Roman Catholic practice of assigning varying degrees of honour amongst those in the office of bishop, depending (for example) on the size of the congregation or the importance of the city wherein the bishop serves.

According to Article 36 of the Australian Church Order, *"In all churches there shall be a consistory composed of the minister(s) of the Word and the elders. It shall meet regularly and be **chaired by the minister.**"* However, the fact that the minister is the chairman does not give him any greater authority or power over the elders. He is not to lord it over the elders and tell them what they must do. It is clear too from Article 80 of the Australian Church Order that there is to be equality amongst the office bearers. *"No church shall in any way lord it over other churches, **no office bearer over other office-bearers.**"*

PREPARATION FOR OFFICE

To desire an office in the Church is commendable. Said Paul to Timothy, *"This is a faithful saying, If a man desires the position of a bishop, **he desires a good work**"* (1 Timothy 3:1). The term bishop describes the elder, the overseer.

Why does the apostle Paul commend the desire for an office, and consequently preparation for the office too, saying it is a good work? If the Lord has given Christ to us to pay for our sins in order to reconcile us to Himself; if He has given so much, then we in turn are to give ourselves wholly to the service of God wherever it is that God may call us to serve. It should not happen that the consistory finds it difficult to draw up a short list of suitable candidates to fill vacancies in the consistory. It is for all of us to prepare ourselves readily and eagerly for total service to the God who graciously saved us in Jesus Christ, even if



it be in the difficult (though beautiful!) task of being office bearer in the Church. All men in the congregation should be preparing themselves for the event that God may call them to the office. Such preparation means to study and know the Scriptures, to cultivate being wise in the Lord, and to be actively involved in congregational life.

It is to the man (as opposed to the woman) that the Lord has given the position of leadership, and to the woman (as opposed to the man) the position of being a help to the man. So the apostle writes that "*I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence*" (1 Timothy 2:12). This does not leave the woman without a task when it comes to the matter of preparing for work as an office bearer. The office bearer needs beside him a help meet, a wife. To be an office bearer, one needs to be prepared. Here the women should see it as their role to stand beside their husbands in all of life, and so also encourage and assist the husband in preparing himself for office.

ARTICLE 32

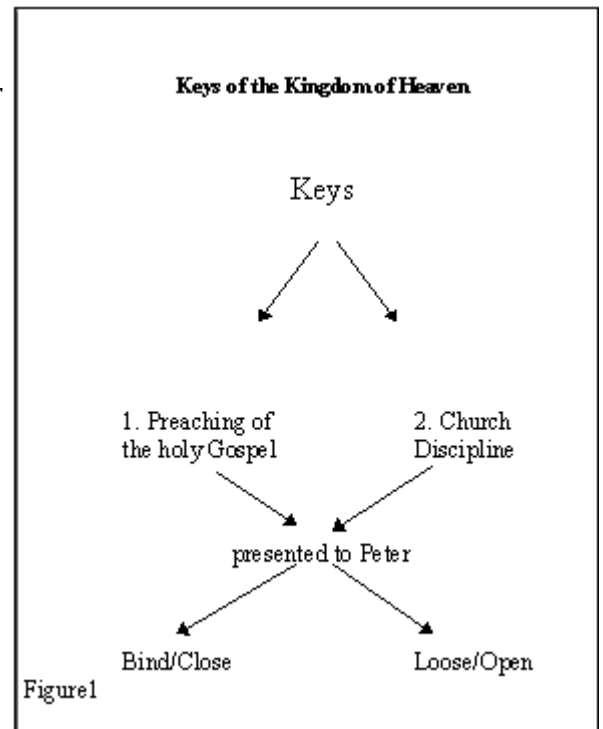
THE ORDER AND DISCIPLINE OF THE CHURCH

With Article 32 we confess that it is for the sake of the "preservation and promotion of harmony and unity" in the Church and for the sake of "keeping all believers in obedience to God" that the Church exercises discipline and excommunication. The Church does not do this on its own authority, nor does she do so in a self chosen manner. According to what we confess on the basis of Scripture in Article 32, the Church exercises discipline and excommunication "in agreement with the Word of God."

THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

Matthew 16:16-19 we read of Jesus' response to Peter's confession "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Said Jesus to Peter, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. **And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.**" Peter was given the keys of the kingdom of heaven, concerning which we confess in Lord's Day 31, Q & A 83, that they are "the preaching of the holy gospel and church discipline. By these two the kingdom of heaven is opened to believers and closed to unbelievers."

According to Mt 16, these keys of the kingdom were presented to Peter to do two things: they bind/close and they loose/open the doors of the kingdom of heaven.



These keys do not lock or unlock a door as such. Rather, as the prophet Isaiah indicates, the possession of the keys means that one has control over who is permitted to go through the door. In Isaiah 22:20-22 we read that God is going to replace Shebna, the king's steward, by Eliakim. A person in this position had control over access to the king, was authorised to give or withhold permission to anyone who wished to see the king. Eliakim was to take on the role of a steward with a key. "The key of the house of David I will lay on (Eliakim's) shoulder; so he shall open, and no one shall shut; and he shall shut and no one shall open." It is precisely this notion to which the Lord Jesus made reference in Matthew 16. Peter too was authorised to control who may go through to the courts of God.

The Roman Catholics have made out that since the person of Peter died, his successor (which today is Pope John Paul II) determines who may go to heaven. However, the Lord's point is that it is not Peter the person who would stand at the gate of Heaven. In Matthew 16:16 Peter made the confession "You are the Christ." Christ then responded by saying that He would build His Church, not on Peter himself, but on the confession of Peter; a confession which is the Church's foundation. It is this confession which determines access to Heaven. Peter was addressed by Christ as the representative of the believing Church. It was the believing Church which through Peter received from Christ the keys of the kingdom of heaven.

In Matthew 18:15-18 Jesus speaks concerning the way in which people are to deal with a wayward brother in the Church. If a sinner refuses to heed the admonitions of a brother, Jesus instructs that brother to take one or two witnesses, "and if he refuses to hear **them**, tell it to the **church**. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Here is the same notion of binding and loosing, but in the context of the Church. The keys of the kingdom of heaven have been given to the Church; more specifically they have been given to the office bearers of the Church.

THE TASK OF THE OFFICE BEARERS

This means that the office bearers have also received the right to exercise these keys. Determining who may or may not go to heaven is a responsibility they are given by the Lord. We, God's covenant people, live on earth. God has caused the majority of us to grow up in Church from infancy. We were raised with Scripture, the Word of salvation, and from a very young age developed the godly habit of going to Church and praying regularly. One could quite easily be tempted to conclude that since I am doing 'all the right things' it is only natural that I will go to heaven when I die. One assumes that having done all that is expected of the believer, the gates of heaven will be open for me and that I will be able to pass through those gates.

What, though, do I need to pass through the gates of heaven? I need faith. In exercising the keys of the kingdom of heaven the office bearers need to see *evidence of faith*. Just like a tree is known by its fruits, so the office bearers will be able to discern faith by the fruits of faith (Matthew 7:17f). The fruits of faith are demonstrated by obedience. Therefore office bearers may not permit anyone to make profession of faith in the absence of such fruits. In order to open the gates of heaven there must be faith. Therefore it is the task of the office bearers to speak with the members of the Church and to discuss with them what it is they see, be it either the presence or the absence of the fruits of faith.

To point out to a brother that his life does not display evidence of faith is an act of love. It is not love to let a brother go on living under the delusion that he is on his way to heaven even while he lives in disobedience; that brother will one day wake up in hell. Love is to confront such a person with his disobedience, to point out the inconsistency between his confession and his conduct, to admonish, and if necessary, to excommunicate.

ELDERS: WATCHMEN OVER GOD'S CHURCH

This responsibility was stressed by the Lord to the prophet Ezekiel. In Ezekiel 33 the Lord illustrates the seriousness of the task of exercising the keys of the kingdom of heaven by comparing it to the task of the watchman of a city. *"...When I bring the sword upon a land, and the people of the land take a man from their territory and make him their watchman, when he sees the sword coming upon the land, if he blows the trumpet and warns the people, then whoever hears the sound of the trumpet and does not take warning, if the sword comes and takes him away, his blood shall be on his own head. He heard the sound of the trumpet, but did not take warning; his blood shall be upon himself. But he who takes warning will save his life. But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, and the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any person from among them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at the watchman's hand"* (Ezekiel 33:2-6).

The Lord then continues to apply the task of the watchman of the city to the task of the watchman of the Church, Ezekiel at the time, but equally applicable to the elder of the Church today. *"So you, son of man (ie, Ezekiel): I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; therefore you shall hear a word from My mouth and warn them for Me. When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you shall surely die!' **and you do not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at you hand.** Nevertheless if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul"* (Ezekiel 33:7-9). To suffer eternal death as a consequence of not heeding the warning of the elders is one's own fault. However, if an elder refrains from warning a wayward brother, the blood of that person who goes to hell will be required from that elder.

It is the obligation of the office bearers to speak and to warn according to Scripture at all times. It is the obligation of all believers to live in the obedience of faith. It is only by faith that one can be saved, and where there is true faith there will also be evidence of faith, fruits of faith, namely, obedience to God's Law. God is consistent. Faithful obedience to Him is the criteria for salvation, both in this life and at the gate of Heaven at the end of this life. Therefore it is an act of love for the watchmen of our souls, the elders, if they warn us when we disobey God, for they do not want us to have any delusions concerning our eternal destination. Endowed with such a responsible task, the elders are in great need of the prayers

of all the church members under their charge.

THE TASK OF THE CONGREGATION

Church discipline, the task of guarding the gates of heaven, is not a task for the office bearers exclusively. This is a task which has been given to the Church at large; it is a task which involves all the Church members. As members of the congregation we are to be our brother's keeper. Out of love for the other we must tell the other if we see him living in sin. Jesus said to His disciples: "*Moreover, if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother*" (Matthew 18:15ff). This is a general principle valid for every child of God. God has loved me so much that He gave His Son to die for my sins. God did the same for my neighbour. If I see my neighbour sin I demonstrate my love for him by telling him of his sin. I do not want to see my neighbour harden in sin, for it is his eternal well being which is at stake. To do this is certainly not easy, yet it is not too difficult for me to do, because the Lord commands it and so He will also give the strength to do it.

"But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church." Should my neighbour not listen to my admonition, I am to take one or two more witnesses with me, so that they might hear my admonitions and testify to the consistory that my charge against my brother has not been heeded. Here is my task. Although the office bearers have the final authority when it comes to church discipline, church discipline does not start with them. Church discipline is first of all the responsibility of the church members. The consistory never works in isolation from the congregation. If I leave the task of church discipline to the consistory only, discipline will not get done. I may well know more about an individual and his way of life than that person's own office bearers. Therefore it is for me to take the first step, and to do so is an act of love towards the person concerned.

ADMONITIONS ARE TO BE RECEIVED IN HUMILITY

If church discipline is an act of love that is exercised within the communion of saints, it means too that if someone comes to me to warn me of any sin on my part, I must adopt an attitude of humility. When I made public profession of my faith, I was asked, "*Do you promise to submit willingly to the admonition and discipline of the Church, if it should happen, and may God graciously prevent it, that you should become delinquent either in doctrine or in conduct?*" ("Form for the Public Profession of Faith", *Book of Praise*, p.593). I promised I would submit. Implicit in both the question and my promise is the possibility for me to become delinquent in doctrine and conduct. It is not above me to do what David did, to commit adultery, or to murder, nor is it above me to do what Peter did, to deny Jesus. Yes, I am most certainly able to commit the same sins David or Peter committed. The fact that in the early church there were brothers who fell for false teaching (see 1 Timothy 1:19f) can only make me humble; I am not above the same error. Hence, if a brother or a sister of the congregation approaches me to warn me, I must be humble and listen. I must adopt the attitude that I am certainly not above doing what my brother or sister wishes to warn me about. It is true that I find humiliating the very notion that I could do as David and Peter did. Yet I am to be realistic, acknowledge my abiding sinfulness, and so receive humbly any who would admonish me.

WHY EXCOMMUNICATE?

In 1 Corinthians 5 we read that there was a member in the Church at Corinth who was living in an incestuous relationship with his stepmother. The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "*It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles - that a man has his father's wife!*". The members of the Church at Corinth were recent converts from heathendom. Now one of these Christians had reverted to the practises of his heathen past, living in sexual immorality.

The apostle's purpose in addressing this matter is to advise the congregation as to how they should deal with this brother. Rather than advise them to be tolerant or lenient on him, with regard perhaps to his background, the apostle is very forthright in what he urges the members to do, namely, "*In the name of*

our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, **deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus**" (1 Corinthians 5:4,5). Note here that Paul is addressing the congregation as a whole, not just the elders. Yes, the elders have the authority and take the initiative when it comes to excommunication, but church discipline commences with the members, involves the members.

Paul's first motivation for advising the above course of action is "*that his spirit may be saved.*" Paul does not want this person to go to hell, to have to live eternally under the dominion of Satan. Paul loves the brother, and it is out of love that he advises the congregation to deliver him to Satan. Better to be delivered to Satan temporarily in this life than eternally in the life to come. This brother's relationship with his stepmother is not an act of obedience to the Lord. Where there is no repentance, excommunication must take place. This brother was not allowed to think he was going to heaven when that was not the case. To deal with this brother in the manner Paul advised was not harsh or cruel, but was rather an act of love, medicine, an expression of care.

The second reason why this brother needed to be excommunicated can be read in 1 Corinthians 5:6, "*Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?*" Sin that is not dealt with can be compared to cancer. Left unchecked, a little cancer will eventually kill the whole body. One immediately acts upon a diagnosis of cancer, for to postpone medical treatment means to hasten death. One cannot afford the time to wait. Although excommunication is carried out first and foremost for the sake of the salvation of the sinner, it is in the second place carried out for the sake of the salvation of the congregation.

Historically, a third reason given for excommunication is that the world is not given cause to blaspheme God. Said Paul concerning the sexual immorality of the brother tolerated in the Church at Corinth, "... *such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles - that a man has his father's wife*" (1 Corinthians 5:1). Corinth was well known for its sexual immorality, but such a sin as was tolerated in the Church was unheard of outside of it amongst the heathen. Allowing the sinner concerned to remain part of the congregation would give the heathen cause to mock God and His Church.

In 1 Timothy 1:18-20 Paul informs Timothy what he did with regard to Hymenaeus and Alexander. They too, having made profession of their faith and then rejecting the faith and making a ruin of it (or as Paul puts it, "*concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck*") were excommunicated by Paul. They too, we read, were "*delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.*" The apostle told them to go, gave them over to Satan so they might repent. Satan is the chief of hell, and it is better to give someone to Satan now before it is too late.

HOW TO RELATE WITH EXCOMMUNICATED MEMBERS OR MEMBERS WHO HAVE WITHDRAWN THEMSELVES

How is one to relate to a person who has withdrawn himself or has been excommunicated from the Church? In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul reminds the Corinthians of what he had earlier written on the subject. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 5:9 "*I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people.*" The Corinthians had apparently understood Paul to mean that one was not to relate in any way with any person who was immoral. Yet that would mean that one would need to go out of the world - since the world is full of immoral people. So Paul explains what he meant. He write in verse 11, "*But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone **named a brother**, who is a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner - **not even to eat with such a person.***" The point here is this: if a person such as described in 1 Corinthians 5 is living in blatant sin, can I possibly act towards him in a way that might indicate to him that all is well? That is impossible. Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, said that one is not even eat with such a one. The sinner must feel that he is on the wrong track.

Paul gave similar advice in his second epistle to the Thessalonians, chapter 3:6,14-15, namely, "*But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you **withdraw** from every **brother** who leads a disorderly life and not according to the tradition which he received from us.... And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and **do not keep company with him**, that he may be*

ashamed. Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother." Concerning those who confess their faith but do not live according to that confession, and do not listen when this is pointed out to them, we cannot and may not act towards them in a way which would indicate that all is fine. We must distance ourselves from them, even before excommunication. The text quoted above is not first of all a reference to excommunication. Already before excommunication we may not act as if all is fine, nor give the message to the wayward brother that we expect to see him in heaven. To really love such a person is to convey to him the message that 'all is not well; you need to change.'

"*Admonish as a brother,*" wrote Paul. A sinful brother, or one who has withdrawn himself or has been excommunicated from the Church should not be treated like an enemy. One does not 'spit on him', but one must nevertheless let him know that he is in the wrong. If I were to act towards him as though there is nothing wrong I would hinder the Lord. The principle here is: in love to keep a certain distance between oneself and such a person. Admittedly, this may be very difficult to practise for direct family members. One's door must stay open to them, for the family bond remains. However, it is a bond which has come under strain.

There is no difference between the way one is to deal with a person who has withdrawn himself from the church or a person who has been excommunicated from the church. In fact, it must be clear that -contrary to the notion that to withdraw oneself is better than being put under church discipline and being excommunicated- withdrawal from the church is a rejection of the admonitions God sends through congregation and officebearers. As such, to withdraw means to short circuit the process of church discipline, which includes the admonitions and prayers of the members of the congregation.

In one's admonitions to those who wish to withdraw or are under church discipline, one can appeal to the promises they voiced when they made public profession of the faith. To do so is to make an extra appeal to their conscience. That is the difference between the two forms for excommunication in our Book of Praise. One is for non-communicant members and the other for communicant members. The latter concerns those who have promised God to "*serve Him according to His Word ... (and) firmly resolve(d) to commit (their) whole life to the Lord's service as a living member of His Church*" ("Form for the Public Profession of Faith", *Book of Praise*, p. 593).

It is for the very reason that church discipline is the responsibility of the congregation that public announcements are made concerning the measures of church discipline the consistory must follow for unrepentant members or concerning letters of withdrawal by members. Also with letters of withdrawal, as with announcements preceding a member's excommunication, the consistory solicits the prayers of the congregation, for "*the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much*" (James 5:16). Together with the consistory, the congregation must make an all out effort to save the sinner, for it is his eternal salvation which is at stake.

ARTICLE 33

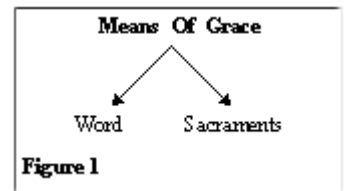
THE SACRAMENTS

MEANS OF GRACE

Through the work of the Holy Spirit within me, I, by nature dead in sin, have become a changed person. The Lord was pleased to take me from Satan's side back to His side. By faith, worked in me by the Holy Spirit, I was justified before God. Once I was back with God, the Holy Spirit worked a change within me, renewed me, sanctified me (see Figures 1 & 2 on page 92).

How does the Holy Spirit work faith in me? Does the Spirit 'pour' faith in to me? No, to work faith within me the Spirit is pleased to use means, instruments, tools. It is for me in turn to let myself be worked upon by those "means of grace." Faith is worked and for this the Spirit uses two means: the Word and the Sacraments (see Figure 1 on this page).

The Word is the primary means. In Romans 10:17 we read, "*So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.*" It is through the Word that faith is worked. Says Paul concerning the Word, the "gospel of Christ", in Romans 1:16, "*...it is **the power of God to salvation** for everyone who believes ...*" The Word is effective, it works results. Said God through the prophet Isaiah, "*So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me void, But it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it*" (Isaiah 55:11). To the Hebrews the apostle says, "*For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart*" (4:12). By His Word the Lord sets out to change hearts, to work faith. Faith comes "*from the Holy Spirit, who works it in our hearts by the **preaching of the gospel** ...*" (Lord's Day 25, Q & A 65).

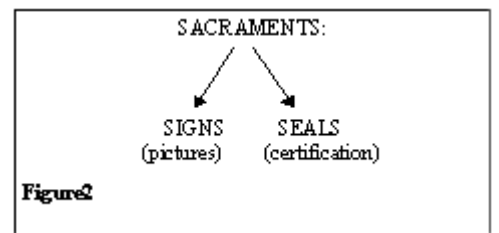


To the Word, the Lord has added the sacraments. Says Article 33 concerning the sacraments, "*(God) has added these to the Word of the gospel ...*" First comes the Word, and added to the Word, 'for the strengthening of the faith worked by the Word' (Lord's Day 25), God has given the sacraments. If one wants faith, there is only one way to obtain it, namely, through the preaching of the Word. There can be no faith without the Word. It is the means the Spirit uses to work faith. For the strengthening of this faith one also needs the sacraments, but the Word is always the priority.

WHAT ARE THE SACRAMENTS?

1) The Sacraments are signs, pictures. Just as pictures in a book illustrate the same message as that conveyed by the words of the book, likewise the sacraments illustrate the message of God's Word. 'A picture is worth more than a thousand words.' By means of the sacraments it is as though the Lord paints a picture beside His Word in order to spell out to us what His Word is all about.

The contents of the picture, the illustration, the sign, are the same as the Word, the preaching. They do not add to or subtract from the Word but serve to complement the Word. As the Church confesses in LD 25: "*both the Word and the sacraments (are) intended to focus our faith on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the only ground of our salvation.*"



2) The Sacraments are seals. The purpose of a seal is to certify that something is true, real. For example, official documents such as passports contain a stamp or a seal in order to prove, certify, that they are not counterfeit but real. The sacraments are not just pictures to complement the Word, but they also seal, certify to me that what God has said in His Word is true for me. They serve to impress upon me the contents of God's Word. For that reason the water of baptism is sprinkled on me. God would seal upon my head what He has promised me in His Word. The water illustrates for me the promises that God washes away all my sins. For that reason too the bread and the cup of the Lord's Supper are given to me,

so that as certainly as I personally eat the bread and drink the wine, so certainly Christ's body was broken and His blood shed for the forgiveness of my sins.

In Article 33 deBres defined the sacraments as "*visible signs and seals of something internal and invisible, by means of which God works in us through the power of the Holy Spirit.*"

THE PURPOSE OF THE SACRAMENTS

With Article 33 we confess that the reason why the Lord has given us the sacraments. "*We believe (ie, this is a confession of faith!) that our gracious God, **mindful of our insensitivity and infirmity**, has ordained sacraments to seal His promises to us and to be pledges of His good will and grace towards us.*" Who is my God? He is a God who knows me so well. He knows that I have my doubts, my struggles of faith. He knows that I can question whether or not His promises are really for me in my circumstances; if God really loves me. By means of the sacraments God would confirm to me that He is gracious. God knows how 'thick headed' and hard hearted I can be. God is mindful of my "*insensitivity and infirmity.*" Therefore, beside the text of His Word, He gives me pictures. More, the pictures God has given also certify to me that His Word is for *me*. What a love this God displays to me! He knows so well that, in the midst of life's struggles, I doubt His word to me, and therefore He gives me the sacraments to confirm that His promises are really true.

So we know of Abraham from the Bible. In Genesis 17:7 God promised Abraham, "*And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you.*" However, God did more than give Abraham a promise. In Genesis 17:10,11 God commanded Abraham, "*Every male child among you shall be circumcised; and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and **it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.***" God instituted circumcision as a sign of the covenant He had just made with Abraham. God knew that He would return to heaven and that Abraham, when on his own again, would come across times that he would doubt God's covenant with him. Abraham would question if he was really a child of the covenant. In His care for Abraham, God caused His child by covenant to bear in his own flesh the sign and seal of the covenant: circumcision. In the face of doubts, Abraham would be repeatedly reminded of God's sure promises to him.

As for me, I was baptised many years ago. I cannot even remember the event. But I am allowed to witness so many baptisms in the course of a given year. Each baptism I may witness is a reminder to me of what God promised me at my baptism. When I see the water sprinkled on a baby's head I not only witness God's promises to that baby, but I am also reminded of the very same promises God made to *me* when I had water sprinkled on my head. By it He sealed to me His promise that He claimed me as His own. Of that wonderful promise I may be reminded at each baptism I witness. A baptism, then, is not just an event for the baby or the family alone, but by each administration of baptism God speaks to the whole congregation, speaks also -again- to me.

CHRIST INSTITUTED TWO SACRAMENTS

Christ instituted only two sacraments: baptism and holy supper. The Anabaptists of deBres' day belittled the sacraments altogether, whereas the Roman Catholics insisted on seven. (They were baptism, confirmation, confession of sin, Lord's supper, anointing of the sick, marriage, and ordination to priesthood .) In reaction to this, deBres saw it necessary to conclude Article 33 with the words, "*...we are satisfied with the number of sacraments **which Christ our Master has instituted for us, namely, two: the sacrament of baptism and the holy supper of Jesus Christ.***"

ARTICLE 34

THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

BAPTISM REPLACES CIRCUMCISION

DeBres begins Article 34 by reminding us of what we confessed in Article 25 concerning Christ's fulfilment of the ceremonial laws. All the Old Testament ceremonial laws were shadows of what would happen in Christ on the cross. Circumcision was one of these ceremonies and symbols. Circumcision involved the drawing of blood by making an incision in the flesh. This blood pointed to the blood of Christ shed on the cross (Article 25). Through His shedding of blood, Christ put an end to all shedding of blood. For that reason circumcision was discontinued. Writes deBres, "*We believe and confess that Jesus Christ, who is the end of the law, has by His shed blood put an end to every other shedding of blood that one could or would make as an expiation or satisfaction for sins. He has abolished circumcision, which involved blood, and has instituted in its place the sacrament of baptism*" (Article 34). As much as the sacrifices of animals in the Temple were fulfilled and abolished by Christ's sacrifice, so too was circumcision fulfilled and abolished.

However, the *content* of circumcision was not abolished. God has replaced circumcision with another sign. In His care for us, God has given not only the text of His Word, but also pictures, graphics to illustrate His gospel (see Article 33). The Old Testament sacraments of Passover and circumcision were replaced by holy supper and baptism respectively in the New Testament. That baptism replaces circumcision is to be concluded from what the apostle writes in Colossians 2:11,12, "*In Him you were also circumcised with **the circumcision made without hands**, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by **the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism**, in which you also were raised with Him **through faith** in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.*" Here we read that baptism is the circumcision made without hands; it is Christ's circumcision, the replacement Christ gave for the circumcision He fulfilled. That circumcision has been replaced by baptism in the New Testament is also confessed by the Catechism in Lord's Day 27, "*This (ie, being "grafted into the Christian church and distinguished from the children of unbelievers") was done in the old covenant by circumcision, **in place of which baptism was instituted in the new covenant.***"

THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM: SIGN

It pleased the Lord to give His children of the New Testament the sign of baptism. Inherent in baptism are the notions of washing, the use of water, and water being put on a person (be it by sprinkling or by immersion). One might well ask why circumcision was replaced by the picture of baptism? Why couldn't circumcision have been replaced by, for example, shaving one's head bald? Is the *washing* so important? What is the significance of the *water* (as opposed to, say, apple juice)? Why must a person have water *put on him* or be *immersed* in water? All these aspects of baptism teach something very fundamental about the meaning of baptism.

The notion of washing implies the presence of dirt, the act of getting rid of dirt, becoming clean (think of our daily habit of washing our hands before we eat). Inherent in baptism is the reality that I am dirty before God, sinful. With the fall into sin, I became offensive to God, dead in sin. (See Article 15 concerning the doctrine of original sin.) However, Christ shed His blood on the cross, and by His blood He washes me. Christ's blood and what His blood does for me is comparable to what water does to my body. As the Catechism puts it, "... *as surely as water washes away the dirt from my body, so certainly His blood and Spirit wash away **the impurity of my soul, that is, all my sins***" (Lord's Day 26, Q & A 69). The blood of Christ cleanses me, and that washing by the blood of Christ is signified by the washing of water in baptism. That's why water is used, plain water. That *water* is used in baptism points up for us the very heart of the gospel. DeBres puts it this way: "*By this (ie, baptism) He signifies to us that as water washes away the dirt of the body when poured on us, and as water is seen on the body of the baptised when sprinkled on him, so the blood of Christ, by the Holy Spirit, does the same thing internally to the soul. It washes and cleanses our soul from sin and regenerates us from children of wrath into children of God.*"

Similarly, the "Form for the Baptism of Infants" (*Book of Praise*, page 584) echoes this understanding of baptism, ie, that it signifies the washing of souls filthy with sin. In no uncertain terms the Form say that the doctrine of baptism teaches that we, and the children we conceive, are dirty, dead in sin, and are therefore in need of washing. To quote the Form, "*The doctrine of holy baptism is summarised as follows: First, we and our children are **conceived and born in sin** and are therefore by nature children of wrath, so that we cannot enter into the kingdom of God unless we are born again. **This is what the immersion in or sprinkling with water teaches us.** It signifies the **impurity of our souls**, so that we may detest ourselves, humble ourselves before God, and seek our **cleansing** and salvation outside of ourselves. **Second**, baptism signifies and seals to us **the washing away of our sins** through Jesus Christ. We are therefore, baptised into the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit."*

This sacrament, then, is a graphic picture of what the gospel is all about. Through this sacrament, the Lord portrays me as filthy, dead in sin. At the same time, through this sacrament God portrays what He sovereignly does for me in Jesus Christ; He washes my sins away so that I am clean, pure. Yes, here is a graphic picture of what the gospel of Jesus Christ is all about.

Baptism as a symbol of washing away sin finds its roots in the Old Testament. In the tabernacle there was a need from time to time for the priests to wash themselves, or for sick people to wash themselves before offering sacrifices (cf Exodus 30:18ff; Leviticus 14:8f; 15:5ff). One also reads of it in Ezekiel 36:25, "*Then I will sprinkle clean **water** on you, and you shall be clean; I will **cleanse** you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.*" This is the Old Testament background to the New Testament baptism one reads of in Mark 1:4,5: "*John came baptising in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. And all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptised by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins.*" John the Baptist baptised with the water of the River Jordan implying thereby the notion of dirt (sin) and cleansing (water). After John the Baptist came Christ, who shed His blood. Christ replaced the OT sacrament of circumcision with this new picture of baptism, a picture rooted in the OT. In Matthew 28:19 Christ told His disciples to baptise all believers: "*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of he Holy Spirit.*" Similarly, in Mark 16:16 Jesus says: "He who believes and is baptised will be saved." So it is that in the book of Acts we read repeatedly that people were baptised when they came to faith (cf Acts 2:38,41; 8:12f,36ff; 9:18; 10:47f; 16:15,33; 18:8).

SPRINKLING OR IMMERSION?

One reads of sprinkling in Ezekiel 36:25: "*Then I will **sprinkle** clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.*" In Hebrews 12:24 the apostle speaks of "*the blood of sprinkling.*" These texts have been used to justify that baptism ought to occur by means of sprinkling.

On the other hand, proponents of baptism by immersion refer to a passage as Romans 6:3,4: "*Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.*" The picture presented by these words is of a baptised person disappearing under the surface of the water as a symbol of his being buried with Christ. Similarly, as one is raised with Christ to a new life, the baptised person arises from under the water. A case can certainly be made, then, for the argument that immersion gives a clearer representation of the wealth of the gospel. This is also the reason why baptism on the mission field tends to be done by immersion.

At the same time, one ought not to become dogmatic about whether baptism is done by sprinkling or by immersion, since the Scriptures do not specify about the manner of baptism. Two practical arguments have contributed to the practice of sprinkling being dominant in reformed circles. These are 1) immersion is not practical for infants; 2) extremes of temperature in Europe (where the reformed have their roots) have historically discouraged immersion.

THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM: SEAL

Christ commanded that each believer be baptised individually (cf Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:16). The book of Acts mentions numerous texts telling us of persons who were baptised individually (cf Acts 2:38,41; 8:12f,36ff; 9:18; 10:47f; 16:15,33; 18:8). This is because baptism is more than a sign, a picture of the gospel. Baptism is also a seal by which God certifies that the truth signified in the sacrament is true for *me*. By having the *individual* receive the sign of baptism, the Lord assures that individual that the promise of the gospel is not a general truth valid for every body in general and no one in particular. Rather, by having the individual receive the sign of baptism, the Lord assures the individual that the promise of the gospel is true specifically for *him*. He may, then, not doubt the truth of what God has done for *him*.

GOD TOOK THE INITIATIVE AND IMPOSED HIS COVENANT

Jesus has given baptism in place of circumcision (see above). If one believes that baptism has replaced circumcision, then consequently the content of baptism is the same as the content of circumcision. Even though the picture has changed, the contents of the picture are still the same. The picture still says the same thing, it still has the same message, it still illustrates the same text, the same gospel message.

One first reads of circumcision in Genesis 17:1-14. In Genesis 17:1,2 we read of God taking

the initiative in coming to Abraham. "*When Abram was ninety-nine years old, **the LORD appeared to Abram** and said to him, I am Almighty God; walk before me and be blameless and **I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.***" It was the Lord who came to Abraham and spoke to him. One does not read here of Abraham coming to the Lord, nor of any communication from Abraham to God. God talked with him. He did not ask Abraham whether he would be interested in a covenant, did not seek Abraham's permission. Rather, "Almighty God" imposed His will on Abraham. Awareness of this fact is crucial for a correct understanding of the concept of baptism. God said to Abraham, "***I will make my covenant between me and you ...***" (See Article 17). With this covenant God said "Abraham, you are mine. **I** am your God. **I** establish a bond between Me and you." See below for the content of this bond. *God* claimed Abraham for Himself, and Abraham had no say in the matter.

As an abiding reminder to Abraham that God meant what He said to Abraham about this covenant, God commanded Abraham to circumcise himself. "... *And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you*" (Genesis 17:11). Looking from a New Testament perspective at this bond which God made with Abraham, we may understand God's claim upon Abraham with the words of the Form of Holy Baptism. That is: though Abraham belonged by nature on Satan's side and was filthy through sin, God yet adopted Abraham as His own, claimed him for Himself. That claim meant that God promised to be Abraham's Father, promised to "*provide (him) with all good and avert all evil or turn it to (his) benefit.*" This was a promise so incredibly rich for Abraham. Here he was, on Satan's side by his own choice, personally responsible for the fact that he was dead in sin and doomed to eternal death. Yet God came to him and gave him such promises! What's more, God's promises didn't end there. To be "your God" meant also that He promised to give up His own Son to death so that He might wash away all Abraham's sins and return him to God's side (justification). On top of that God promised to give His Holy Spirit to dwell within Abraham so that in turn he might receive a new heart, a changed heart (sanctification).

All of the above promises are contained within the covenant God made with Abraham in Genesis 17. What was there for Abraham to say in reply to God? Was there room for Abraham's input? Note how God introduces Himself to Abraham in Genesis 17:1, "*I am Almighty God.*" Would it have been fitting then for God to have said to Abraham, "let's discuss a covenant I wish the two of us to make?" Would it have been proper for God to ask Abraham, "are you interested in making a covenant with me?" No! To whom was Almighty God addressing Himself? To none other than Abraham: a creature, a sinner. To this sinner God said "you are Mine."

Circumcision as sign of the covenant has been replaced by holy baptism. All the wealth implicit in Abraham's circumcision is then true also for me! I am by nature a child of the devil, filthy in my sins. But God sovereignly imposes His covenant upon me, so that He is my Father, His Son is my Saviour, His Holy Spirit is my Renewer. Baptism "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"

means that all the riches summarised in the "Form for Holy Baptism" (page 584) are true for me. Almighty God sovereignly imposes His wealth on me, without my asking. How gracious this God is! And how incredibly rich He makes me!

GOD'S COVENANT IS ALSO WITH ABRAHAM'S DESCENDANTS

In Genesis 17:7 one reads, "*And I will establish my covenant between me and you **and your descendants** after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you **and your descendants** after you.*" At face value these words surprise us, and would no doubt have surprised Abraham, for at the time God said this to Abraham he had no children. However, God didn't need Abraham's children to be there. God said He made His covenant with Abraham and with the children He would give Abraham. It was important that God said this, so that when Abraham later received a son, he would know that the child he received was a covenant child because God had already said so, and not because the child was good or because Abraham agreed to it. Just as Abraham had no input, no say in the matter, likewise his children would have no input. God's covenant speaks first and foremost of God's relation with His people; it speaks of God's actions towards His people.

Abraham is "*the father of all those who believe*," Romans 4:11. That is why we speak in terms of the covenant being made with believers and their seed. God's covenant is imposed on us before we are able to make any decision.

In view of the riches of this doctrine, deBres could tell his congregation how rich they were in spite of the tensions of their day, the threats and realities of persecution. In the face of the difficulties of their circumstances, he reminded them how rich they were because God had made His covenant with them. Hence deBres writes concerning baptism, "*This serves as a testimony to us that He will be our God and gracious Father for ever.*"

GOD GIVES PROMISES; I AM TO EMBRACE THE CONTENTS OF HIS PROMISES

We believe that God makes His covenant with believers and their children. Due to the very rich promises contained in this covenant, this covenant makes these believers and their children so very rich. Does this mean, however, that every child also receives the *contents* of the promises? The point is this: God's covenant contains two parts: promises and obligations (see "Form for Baptism", page 585). In order to get the contents of the promises of the covenant I must answer the obligations of the covenant. This can be compared to receiving a cheque. I don't have the \$100 mentioned in the cheque unless and until I do something with the cheque, namely, cash it. The cheque itself is no more than a promise with which I must *do* something in order to receive that which has been promised. Likewise, with baptism. God graciously imposes His glorious covenant upon me. How do I obtain the contents of what He promises me in His covenant? I obtain the contents by responding to the promises made to me in baptism. *I need to respond to my baptism!* This response is *faith*. In faith I need to embrace what God promises me. If I fail to do that, I will not get the contents of His promises.

Jacob and Esau serve to illustrate the point. They both received the same promises, yet Jacob went to Heaven and Esau went to hell (see Malachi 1:2f). When God said to Abraham in Genesis 17:7, "*And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you in their generations ...*" then God meant this with respect to both Jacob and Esau (Abraham's grandchildren). God made His covenant with both of them, gave both of them exactly the same promises. Yet only one received the contents of these promises. How can this be? Faith is the deciding factor. "*Since every covenant contains two parts, a promise and an obligation, we are, through baptism, **called and obliged by the Lord to a new obedience. We are to cleave to this one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to trust Him, and to love Him with our whole heart, soul and mind, and with all our strength***" ("Form for the Baptism of Infants", page 585). Here is described for us what faith is and entails. If I fail to believe what God has said and promised to me in the covenant, then I do not receive the contents of the rich promises God gives. I need to *respond* to the promises of the covenant, to believe them.

Responding to God's promises, believing them, working with them is not a 'once off' action' but a daily

exercise. Today God leads my life in a particular way. In my particular circumstances today (be it an accident, a head-ache, a rebellious child), I am to work with the promises of Scripture, namely, that "*all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose*" (Romans 8:28). This promise of Scripture is paraphrased by the "Form for the Baptism of Infants" as God "*providing me with all good and averting all evil or turning it to my benefit.*"

My response to God's promises then also determines how I respond to the sins I commit daily. As I reflect upon my sins of the day and repent of them, I respond to God's promises by remembering and believing that *today's* sins too are washed away in the blood of Christ, forgiven, for that is what God signified and sealed to me at my baptism. Similarly, in the face of the failures I daily see in myself in my struggle against sin, I respond with faith to the promise of God every time I believe again that God gives me His Holy Spirit to renew my heart. Responding to God's promises in baptism is a daily exercise.

If, on the other hand, I decline (daily) to respond in faith, my unbelief does not undo the covenant God made with me, for God's covenant stands eternally. Then the curses of God shall invariably come upon me.

CHILDREN ARE ALSO TO BE BAPTISED

Prior to and during the days of deBres', it was said that children should not be baptised. It is still said today. The reasons given for not baptising children include

1. the New Testament does not in any text command infant baptism,
2. the New Testament does not cite any example of infant baptism,
3. children don't understand baptism, and
4. we do not know if the children in question indeed believe.

DeBres argues strongly against the notion that children ought not to be baptised. He writes, "*... we reject the error of the Anabaptists, ... who also condemn the baptism of the little children of believers. We believe that these children ought to be baptised and sealed with the sign of the covenant*"

In Lord's Day 27.74 the Heidelberg Catechism gives three reasons why infants must also be baptised:

1. "*Infants as well as adults belong to God's covenant and congregation.*" This is a reference to Genesis 17:7, where God told Abraham that His covenant was made with Abraham "*and your descendants after you.*" This notion one finds repeated in Acts 2:39, "*For the promise is to you **and your children** ...*" God does not just make His covenant with individuals but also with the children He gives to believers. To the Corinthians, amongst whom there were families in which only one of the parents came to faith, Paul writes, "*For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now are holy*" (1 Corinthians 7:14). If one parent believes, then in God's eyes the children are holy - His children.
2. The promises of the covenant apply no less to the children than to the adults. "*Through Christ's blood the redemption from sin and the Holy Spirit, who works faith, are promised to them no less than to adults.*" See again Acts 2:39, "*and **to your children.***" For that reason Christ also laid His hands on the children and blessed them, acknowledging the children too as heirs of the kingdom of heaven. "*Let the little children come to me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven.*" (Matthew 19:14). Jesus was also interested in the 'little ones.'
3. Children of believers are different than children of unbelievers. "*Therefore, by baptism, as sign of the covenant, they must be grafted into the Christian church and **distinguished from the children of unbelievers.** This was done in the old covenant by circumcision, in place of which baptism was instituted in the new covenant.*" The children of believers are different because they are God's children. (See proof-texts above.)

For us in the Free Reformed Churches today infant baptism as such is not an issue. Around us though, 'conservative Christianity' is characterised by evangelicalism. Characteristic of evangelicalism is that children are not baptised. How can this be? We have above established on the basis of Scripture that children do belong to the Covenant, and therefore should be baptised; God's promises in Jesus Christ are

meant for the children too. The Gospel speaks of God sending His Son to pay for my sins when I have not even desired or asked Him to do so. This was entirely God's will. It was God who imposed His covenant gospel, salvation, on me and on the children He is pleased to give. I do not have any say in the matter. God imposes His covenant upon me. God is God, and I am a sinner. Here we come to the deciding factor with regard to baptising or not baptising infants. **How does one view the relationship between Almighty God and the sinner?** Today the distance between God and the sinner is being shrunk. See Diagram 3 on page 63. In the diagram, the distance between God and man is absolute. Today's theological climate, however, brings God down somewhat from the top of the page, and raises man somewhat from the bottom. Hence today there is room for the opinion and input of the sinner. So, instead of baptism spelling out God's sovereign work upon me, baptism is made into a sign that faith exists in my heart, that I am pleased to receive God's promises and believe in Him.

This attack on the relation between God and man does not pass the Reformed faith by. How long will the Church continue to embrace the notion of infant baptism? The Church will do so for as long as it holds on to the fact that God is **God**. As long as God is seen to be the Almighty who sovereignly imposes His work of salvation upon people dead in sin, there is a place for infant baptism. When man is given a place in the covenant in the sense that the reality of God's promises is dependent in some way on man's answer, there is no longer room for a sacrament that celebrates God's sovereign gift of salvation to dead sinners. The Church will continue to administer infant baptism for as long as she holds on to the opening section of the Form for the Baptism of Infants - which in no flattering terms describes us as filthy sinners. As soon as one raises the self, and so implicitly lowers God, the doctrine of infant baptism is at stake.

That is also when we lose our comfort. If baptism no longer signifies God's deeds to me, if baptism instead signifies that I have faith in my heart, then I'm left with doubt. For we all experience that daily our faith fluctuates, from strong to weak, from confident to doubtful. If baptism signifies the faith in my heart, then I am robbed of all comfort and security.

Baptism is about God saying, "you are mine." I have been baptised. That means that God said to me, "I am your God. My Son washed away your sin. I give my Holy Spirit to live in your heart. Nothing can ever change that." The enemies in this world can take away house and health, freedom and fortune. But no one can take away from my forehead the sign and seal of God's covenant, the promise from God that His Son died to pay for my sins so that now Almighty God is my faithful Father. *"...I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Romans 8:38,39). None of these things can ever take away the comfort of my baptism. Therefore I must hold on to what baptism is. It is the sign and seal of God's gospel to me: "You are mine." This alone gives security, come what may.

NO REPEAT BAPTISMS

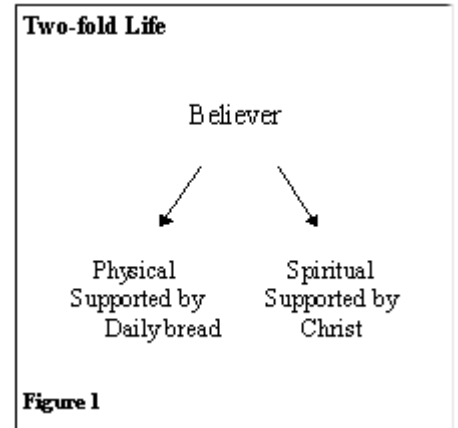
Since God is God, His promises are sure. God always means what He says, and therefore He only needs to say it once only. Hence I am baptised once only.

ARTICLE 35

THE SACRAMENT OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

THE REGENERATED HAVE A TWOFOLD LIFE

In this article deBres starts out by speaking about two forms of life. *"One is physical and temporal ... the other is spiritual and heavenly."* Both forms need to be nourished and sustained. By the physical, temporal life is meant our physical bodies, which require food, bread. *"For the support of the physical and earthly life God has ordained earthly and material bread. This bread is common to all just as life is common to all."* Here deBres writes that all people depend on earthly bread in order to survive. However, some people have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, and so also live a spiritual, heavenly life. This form of life also requires nourishment and sustenance, though not by means of physical food, but spiritual food: Christ's flesh. Writes deBres, *"For the support of the spiritual and heavenly life, which **believers** have, He has sent them a living bread which came down from heaven, namely, Jesus Christ, who nourishes and sustains the spiritual life of the believers when He is eaten by them ..."* Christ is the spiritual food for the soul of the believers, the regenerated.



It was Christ Himself who said He was our spiritual food. Said He to the Jews in John 6:48-51, *"I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness and are dead. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die. **I am the living bread** which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and **the bread that I shall give is my flesh**, which I shall give for the life of the world."* Manna could only nourish and sustain the physical body in its temporal existence, but Christ's flesh, spiritual food, nourishes and sustains unto eternity.

THE LORD'S SUPPER

Having established that the regenerated have a twofold life for which they require two forms of food, deBres moves on to discuss how the regenerated may be sure of their receipt of spiritual food. For like all things spiritual, spiritual food and drink likewise are invisible to the naked eye. In order to reassure us therefore that He does indeed nourish and refresh our souls with spiritual food and drink, Christ has given us a sign and seal of this reality by means of the sacrament of the Lord's supper. *"To represent to us the spiritual and heavenly bread, Christ has instituted earthly and visible bread as a sacrament of His body and wine as a sacrament of His blood."*

THE CONTENT OF THE SACRAMENT OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

Article 34 confessed how in the New Testament Baptism replaced the Old Testament sacrament of circumcision. This did not mean that the New Testament sacrament took on a different meaning, or that its content had changed; rather, the NT sacrament of baptism was a new picture meant to illustrate the same message as the OT sacrament of circumcision. Since circumcision involved cutting the flesh (that is: the drawing of blood), there is this difference between circumcision and Baptism, that the former includes blood in its picture, while the latter doesn't; the latter includes the notion of washing. The reason for the lack of blood in the New Testament picture of Baptism is that Christ, at His death, shed His blood and thereby fulfilled all sheddings of blood (see further Article 25).

The same can be said of the Lord's supper. The Lord's supper is the New Testament picture which replaces the Old Testament picture of Passover. However, the content of the sacrament of the Lord's supper is in essence the same as the content of the Passover. In Matthew 26:26-30 we read of Jesus instituting the Lord's supper. Of great significance is Jesus' timing of this institution. Where was Jesus at the time? What was Jesus doing when He instituted the Lord's supper? In Matthew 26:17-25 we read of the preparation and celebration of the Passover which Jesus celebrated with the disciples. *"Now on the*

*first day of the Feast of the Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying to Him, 'Where do you want us to prepare for you to eat the Passover?'" The disciples carried out Jesus' instructions, saying to the man at whose house they were to celebrate it, "The Teacher says, 'My time is at hand; **I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.**'" This is exactly what happened. "Now when evening had come, He sat down with the twelve.... **And as they were eating (the Passover), Jesus took bread, blessed it and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, 'Take eat; this is my body.'** Then **He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you. For this is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.'**"*

When Jesus instituted the Lord's supper, He was eating the Passover. To understand this new sacrament, it is of great significance to appreciate that the Lord's supper was instituted during the Passover. This timing serves to draw out the connection between the Lord's supper and Passover; the one flows into the other.

PASSOVER

In order to come to an understanding of what Passover was all about one must read of its institution as described in Exodus 12:1-14. The setting of the first Passover celebration was Israel's approaching exodus from Egypt. Passover itself involved the killing of a lamb (hence the shedding of blood) and eating that lamb. Two elements can be distinguished in Passover: it involved 1) an offering, and 2) a meal. The offering, the slaughtered lamb, pointed to Calvary (as did all other sheddings of blood in the Old Testament). The eating of the lamb had to be done within the family circle; Passover was a meal to be eaten together with others, within the communion of saints. At the command of the Lord a lamb had to be slaughtered and eaten. Further, the blood of the lamb was to be smeared on the lintel and the two doorposts of the homes of the Israelites. The angel of the Lord, when he saw the blood of the lamb on the lintel and doorposts would pass over that house, but kill all the firstborn in those houses where this blood was lacking. The Passover would bring on Israel's Exodus from Egypt.

Hence the setting of the Passover was one of **deliverance** from Egypt. This deliverance was in turn symbolic of man's deliverance from Satan's power (see Figure 1, Article 22, Page 86). Israel's deliverance from Egypt spelled out the Gospel of salvation. While the people of the land perished (as symbolised by the death of all Egypt's firstborn) the people of Israel were taken from Satan's side to God's side, taken from slavery to freedom.

God commanded that the Passover be celebrated once a year (Leviticus 23:4ff; Numbers 28:16ff; Deuteronomy 16:1ff). Each year the people of Israel were required to remember both the *slavery* they experienced in Egypt (symbolic as it was of slavery to sin and Satan) as well as the *deliverance* from this slavery (symbolic of deliverance from sin and Satan through Jesus Christ). Israel was not to forget; the gospel of redemption was to stay close to their hearts.

INSTITUTION OF LORD'S SUPPER

Jesus, consequently, also ate the Passover. In Matthew 26 one reads how He celebrated the Passover together with His disciples in an upper room. For that celebration too a lamb had been killed, with a view to Christ's death on the cross (which was to take place the next day, Good Friday). That celebration too, was a meal, eaten together within the communion of saints.

"As they were eating Jesus took bread, blessed it and broke it, and gave it to the disciples" (Matthew 26:26). Meat (the sacrificed lamb) constituted the main part of the Passover meal. Yet Jesus did not choose a piece of meat for His new sacrament; He instead picked up some of the bread laying on the table. Why? The lamb spoke of the shedding of blood, looked forward to the death of the Saviour on the cross. Christ was about to go to the cross; tomorrow would be Good Friday, when Christ would shed His blood to fulfil all sheddings of blood and thus also make all pictures with blood unnecessary. On the threshold of Calvary Jesus Christ institutes a new picture for the edification of His New Testament people, a picture that takes into account the development of salvation history; the New Testament Church looks **back** on a cross where redemption **has been accomplished**. So the New Testament picture no longer needs to include blood in it. That's why Christ chose a different element, the bread, to replace the

meat of the Passover. This bread, blessed and broken, symbolised His broken body on the cross. "*This is my body,*" said Christ. So also the wine, which by its red colour symbolised Christ's blood shed on the cross. "*For this is my blood,*" said Christ.

Just as the Passover was instituted in the context of Israel's redemption from Egypt, so the Lord's supper was instituted in the context of redemption from Satan: tomorrow Christ would go to the Cross to have His body broken and His blood shed for the payment of sin, for the redemption of Christ's own. Though the Passover and the Lord's supper have different nuances (eg, the Passover looked forward to the cross of Calvary and the Lord's supper looks back on it), the two pictures have exactly the same message in common: man's redemption from slavery to Satan and sin.

THE LORD'S SUPPER AND THE COVENANT

During the institution of the new sacrament, Jesus held up a cup and said to His disciples, "*Drink from it, all of you. For this is my **blood of the new covenant**, which is shed for many for the remission of sins*" (Matthew 26:27,28). The word 'covenant' usually directs our thoughts to the sacrament of Baptism. We readily confess that Baptism is the sign and seal of the covenant. However, the word 'covenant' should equally make us think of the Lord's Supper, for the reality of the covenant is driven home to us also in the sacrament of Lord's Supper. The blood of the Old Testament sacrifices and Passover lamb as well as the blood of THE sacrificial LAMB are closely connected with God's covenant. In Exodus 24:5-8 we read, "*Then (Moses) sent young men of the children of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the LORD. And Moses took half the blood and put it in basins, and half the blood he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient." And Moses took the blood, sprinkled it on the people, and said, "Behold the **blood of the covenant** which the LORD has made with you according to all these words."*

Israel was encamped at the foot of Mt Sinai (see Exodus 19) when this event took place. A number of oxen were sacrificed, and the blood of these oxen preserved. Half of the blood was offered to God ("*sprinkled on the altar*"); the other half was set to one side in basins. We need to bear in mind that God had just made His covenant with the people (Exodus 20). The Book of the Covenant from which Moses read to the people (24:7) refers to Exodus chapters 21-23, which serve to spell out in greater detail the requirements of the ten commandments. After Moses read this book to them and heard Israel's confession of faithfulness to their covenant God, Moses sprinkled the remaining half of the blood on the people. This blood sprinkled on the people was visible proof of what God promised to each of them individually, namely, "you are Mine, and I am your God; see, you have blood on you as evidence of this."

Here God underlined His covenant with the symbol of blood. He wished to impress that the covenant He made with His people was real; God had made His covenant with each of them.

Christ also spoke of "blood of the (new) covenant" when He took the cup and blessed it. One doesn't read of blood being caught in basins, or of blood being sprinkled. Why not? Christ spoke of "the new covenant." In this covenant there was no blood of sheep or oxen, for His own blood would be shed. 'New' did not mean a different covenant than that of Exodus 24; it was the same covenant as that of the Old Testament but with Christ's sacrifice about to occur, this covenant was about to enter a new phase and Jesus wished to underline the reality of this covenant with the cup. In the Lord's supper too, the Lord wishes to drive home to us that He made His covenant with each of us. Just as the Israelites of Exodus 24 had visible proof of this when they washed the blood off themselves, so the disciples -and we today- have tangible evidence of the reality of God's covenant by drinking from the cup. I am to drink from God's cup, for He made His covenant with *me*.

A MEAL AT THE LORD'S TABLE

In Matthew 26 we read that Jesus and His disciples were eating around a table. Christ was the host, with his disciples around Him. Though the Passover was a sacrifice AND a meal (see above), the Lord's supper which Christ instituted had no sacrifice, no offering, because Christ Himself would die the next

day. Christ Himself is the Passover sacrifice. "... For indeed Christ, **our Passover**, was sacrificed for us" (1 Corinthians 5:7). Since Christ is our Passover Lamb, we no longer require the element of offering in the Lord's supper. Of the two elements that characterised the Passover, the Lord's supper retains 'only' the element of the meal.

One enjoys a meal with friends; not with enemies. Yet with whom did Christ eat? He ate with sinners, persons who by nature are enemies of God! Christ Himself is the host, and we are His guests. When I come to His table He offers me a piece of bread and says to me, "take, eat, this is My body." He also offers me a cup and says, "drink from it." These are commands, imperatives. I am **bold** to do so. Christ will hear no protest. It is a surprise indeed, that I, a sinner, should be commanded to sit at the table with the Lord Jesus Christ. This spells out the marvel of the Gospel! To sit at table with Christ is possible only when my sins have been taken away; when I am no longer Christ's enemy. Truly, the tension which made God drive us out of Paradise is gone! He would have sinners sit down in peace at His table! We are allowed to be His friends!

THE BREAD AND THE WINE: SIGNS AND SEALS GIVEN TO THE PERSON

"*Drink from it **all** of you,*" said Christ when He took the cup. Christ addressed each of the disciples. To Peter and to John and to Thomas and to Matthew He said, "it is for you; you drink from it." Christ personalised it. He addressed individuals at His table. The bread and wine, serving as signs of Christ's broken body and shed blood respectively, also serve as a **seal** on the reality that the Gospel is for me: it is personal. The bread and the wine which I am commanded to eat and drink seal to me the Gospel of the Table of the Lord. The bread and wine I consume at His table seal to me the reality of His promises to me. God's promises are as real as the bread and wine themselves.

NOURISHMENT BY FAITH

Does my sitting at the table automatically make me partake of the riches of the table? No. Writes deBres, *Although the sacrament is joined together with that which is signified, the latter is not always received by all. The wicked certainly takes the sacrament to his condemnation, but he does not receive the truth of the sacrament.*" One can sit at a table laden with food, but this food will not nourish the body unless it is eaten. Likewise with the table of the Lord. It is laden with rich food for the soul, but the soul will not be nourished unless it eats this food, not with the mouth, but by faith.

To assist us in appreciating what it means to eat 'by faith', we may consider the instructions God gave to Israel concerning the first Passover. Read Exodus 12:1-14. Israel was told on the first of the month (vs 2) to set aside a lamb on the tenth day of the month (vs 3) to be killed on the fourteenth day (vs 6). On the first day of the month they were told what to do with the lamb's blood on the fourteenth day; they had to smear it on the door-posts and lintels of the doors of their houses (vs 7). They were also told on the first day that on the fourteenth they had to eat the lamb roasted (not raw or boiled), had to eat also unleavened bread (= bread made without yeast) and bitter herbs (vs 8). More, when they ate this meal on the fourteenth, they had to wear "a belt on your waist, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand" (vs 11).

This meal which God wanted His people to eat on the evening of the fourteenth of the month had something quite distasteful, even offensive, about it. Blood around the door?! Bitter herbs for vegetables?! A lump of unleavened bread?! This is distasteful, offensive. Yet for two weeks the people could think on the coming meal..., could think about whether to obey or not..., really think about whether or not they wanted to swear blood around Mom's clean front door.... To top it all off, God spoke of an angel of death coming through the land checking the doors.... To obey took **faith**.

What was God's purpose in all this? Why the instruction in Exodus 12:11 to eat such a distasteful meal, in haste, dressed for travel, with sandals on their feet and staff in hand? Israel was about to leave the land of Egypt. The Lord was telling His people what was going to happen later that night. To believe the Lord's word and act on it required faith. One doesn't smear blood on the door-posts, or prepare a feast with bitter herbs and unleavened bread just for the sake of it. It was a question of obedience, no matter how off-

putting it sounded. Failure to obey would be punished by the slaying of the firstborn in the house. It was an act of faith on the part of the Israelites to believe what God said, that He would deliver them from Egypt. They had to hold on to God's promises. See Hebrews 11:28.

To be seated at the Lord's table does not benefit me as such. Sitting at the Lord's table only benefits me if I believe that Christ saves me from Satan. This is a reality I cannot see with the naked eye. I cannot see with my eyes that my soul is nourished at the table. At the Lord's table I eat by FAITH and believe that my soul is nourished by what the piece of bread and sip of wine signify and seal to me, namely, that God's promises are true for me. It is by faith that I embrace and accept God's Word and promises. I believe that God's forgiveness and grace are for me. That is what nourishes my soul to everlasting life.

Here lies the difference between the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's supper. Baptism is a sacrament I receive. With the Lord's supper I need to respond to what God says. In the Lord's supper I need to work, busy myself with the Word of God. That means I am to accept in faith what God has promised me at Baptism, namely, "you are My child, and hence all My promises are for you." Therefore deBres writes, "*the manner in which we eat (the body of Christ) is not by mouth but in the spirit by faith.*"

SELF-EXAMINATION

If at the Lord's table I am to eat and drink by faith, then I cannot just go without examining myself. This notion of self-examination is laid before us in 1 Corinthians 11:17-33. The Corinthians Christians had the practice of eating a meal together. This communal meal was common in the early church, and appears to have flowed into a Lord's supper celebration (see Acts 2:42). What actually happened in Corinth, though, was that the rich ate sumptuously while the poor looked on, and when the rich had eaten sufficiently, the Lord's supper was celebrated (see vs 21, 33f). Paul admonishes the Corinthians for this and instructs them to have their meals at home, for the brotherly love which the Lord's supper speaks of was so sadly lacking in their conduct. Their conduct spoke only of greed. "*Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? ... But if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, lest you come together for judgment*" (vs 22,34). It is in this context that Paul brings up the institution of the Lord's supper as Christ instituted it in Matthew 26, and which in turn prompted him to give the instruction for self-examination. "*For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you (when I first preached the gospel to you): that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.'* In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, '*This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me*'" (vss 23ff). Since that, according to Jesus' institution, is what the supper of the **Lord** is, "*you proclaim the Lord's death*" "*as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup*" (vs 26).

That reality in turn means, though, that I cannot lightly eat of this bread and drink of this cup. If the bread and cup of the Lord's supper point up what Christ did for me in having His body broken on the cross and His blood be shed for my salvation, it will not do for me to act selfishly and cold-hearted to my poorer brothers and sisters. So Paul says: "*whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord*" (vs 27). So: "**let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of that cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body**" (vs 28f). Some in Corinth, because of their selfishness, were in fact eating and drinking "*in an unworthy manner*" and the result was that "*many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep*" (vs 30). In other words: their selfish attitude at the Lord's table prompted God to bring sickness and death within their congregation. Hence the desperate need for self-examination.

How does one examine oneself? What does self-examination involve? To go back to the situation in Corinth, one could ask how the Corinthians were to examine themselves. They were to ask themselves what was important to them. Did one show the mark of a Christian by feeding one's own appetite while they ignored the neighbour's hunger? Yet that was not what the Lord taught in the Lord's supper. He gave up His life for the unworthy. The Corinthians in turn, as true Christians, were to give themselves in service to their poor brothers and sisters.

The fact that Christ invites me to His table, that he gives me all the riches of His covenant, and that He gives the same to everyone else at His table, determines the kind of bond that ought to exist between me and my neighbour: ie, a bond of love. If Christ laid down His life for me and for my neighbour, then I may not be cold-hearted to that neighbour. I need to love him as Christ loved both him and me. This was definitely not the case in Corinth, as Paul had to point out, and the result was sickness and death amongst them.

The "Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper" (*Book of Praise*, page 595) elaborates on this notion of self examination after first quoting from 1 Corinthians 11. Self-examination is divided into three parts:

1. *"Let everyone consider his sins and accursedness so that he, detesting himself, may **humble** himself before God."* The point of self-examination is not to discover whether or not one has sinned. The Form takes one's "sins and accursedness" for granted, and asks us to "consider" these "sins and accursedness". Considering them is to make one humble before God. 'Humble' is the key word here. (See the first part of the Catechism which deals with our Sin and Misery, Lord's Days 2-4).

2. To believe that Christ by His death on the cross has made payment for all my sins. I am not to look at myself but to Christ, for in Christ I learn what God has done for me, a wretched sinner. God gave up His Son to death in order to pay for my sins. It is for me to examine myself whether I accept this as true, for faith is to believe that this is indeed so. (See the second part of the Catechism which deals with Our Deliverance, Lord's Days 5-31).

3. To have a firm resolve to show true thankfulness for what God has done in Christ. One does this by loving one's neighbour as oneself. (See the third part of the Catechism which deals with Our Thankfulness, Lord's Days 32-52).

Will I, having examined myself, confess that I am a lost sinner? Do I believe that Christ has paid for all my sins? Do I, in thankfulness to God, seek to live a life of obedience to God and love to my neighbour? It is my conduct -be it with so many remaining shortcomings- that needs to demonstrate what lives in my heart. But if such evidence of God's work in me appears in my life, my words, my attitude, God **commands** me (sinner that I am) to sit down at His table. For He wants to impress upon me what He has done for me in Christ. Therefore He tells me to eat the bread and to drink the wine. And He tells me that as surely as I taste these, so certainly has He given Christ for me. In the face of all my sins God speaks to me, telling me that Christ is for me.

For the purpose of self-examination, the celebration of the Lord's supper is announced in church a week in advance. However, that does not exclude the need for daily self-examination. Self-examination is to be 'part and parcel' of my daily life and not something I just do before attending the Lord's supper four times a year. Daily I need to look at my life, and ask myself if I am humble on account of my sins. Daily I need to look to Christ in the face of my particular sins. Daily it must be my firm desire to do God's will.

CHILD PARTICIPATION

The attendance of children at the Lord's supper was not a point of discussion in church history until recently. It is because of the need and ability to "*rightly examine ourselves*" that children are excluded from the table of the Lord's supper. They need first to reach an age of discernment.

ARTICLE 36

THE CIVIL GOVERNMENT

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Before the time of the Reformation, the only common religion was Roman Catholicism. As a result of the Reformation people were divided into three basic groups. People either remained Roman Catholic, chose to return to Scripture and so joined the Reformation, or they joined the Reformation but developed into a radical faction known as the Anabaptists.

With respect to civil authorities, the Roman Catholics held on to the errors they had been taught over the years. The Pope, they insisted, in fact had authority over the kings and rulers of the earth. Those who joined the Reformation confessed that Christ ascended to God's throne in Heaven from where He rules the world today through the kings and rulers of His choosing. The Anabaptists, though they joined the Reformation, developed an extremist, even fanatical stance on the subject of Christ's lordship over this present world. They reasoned that 'since we belong to Christ we do not belong to this world' (for the world was opposed to Christ, was 'worldly'), and consequently they distanced themselves from things pertaining to this world. Since Christians belong to another world, and the Government is something that belongs to this world, they rejected the Government, and refused to obey civil authorities. They refused to pay taxes, refrained from swearing civil oaths and abstained from involvement in politics. Their attitude to the Government was one of rebellion and it opened the way to anarchy. Roman Catholic authorities tended to lump the Reformed and the Anabaptists together as all being opposed to government.

The confession deBres recorded concerning the civil government was written in the context of suspicion by Roman Catholic authorities to himself and his people. DeBres lived under the rule of a Government which was staunchly Roman Catholic, and so suspected him (and his congregation members) of being subversive and rebellious (ie, deBres and his congregation were branded as Anabaptists). To make clear that he soundly condemned as unScriptural the Anabaptists heresies regarding authority, deBres included in his Confession an article about Civil Government. Both his own people and the authorities should be very aware that a Christian could not be a political revolutionary. Hence his bold statement: *"For this reason we condemn the Anabaptists and other rebellious people, and in general all those who reject the authorities and civil officers, subvert justice, introduce a communion of goods, and confound the decency that God has established among men."*

This confession too was a confession deBres made in the obedience of faith. One appreciates this all the more when one considers that in deBres' day he and his congregation in Doornik were being persecuted for their faith by the staunchly Roman Catholic Government, despite the fact that in general life they were law abiding citizens. DeBres and his congregation could not meet together on Sundays for fear of being arrested and put to death; instead, deBres travelled from house to house to encourage the members of his flock with the Word of God. Always the lives of the congregation members were characterised by so much uncertainty and fear. Yet in that situation deBres makes the confession contained in Article 36 concerning the civil authorities. Though the temptation was great to rise in rebellion against the government, deBres taught his congregation what he learned from Scripture. This confession, we can understand, did not come easily across the lips of a persecuted believer. To make this confession in such circumstances is the obedience of faith.

A SCRIPTURAL CONFESSION

"We believe that, because of the depravity of mankind, our gracious God has ordained kings, princes, and civil officers." This is a very biblical statement. Says Paul in Romans 13:1-2, *"Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and **the authorities that exist are appointed by God**. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the **ordinance of God**, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves."* Here Paul states very emphatically that authorities have not arisen of their own accord, nor do authorities exist because of wishes of the people. Our society embraces the principle that governments come from the people; democracy is the rule of the people, by

the people, and *for* the people. But Paul taught differently, and deBres, in his situation of persecution, believed and confessed what the apostle taught: all governments come from God. That is why he dares to write, despite his situation, that the authorities of his day were ordained by "*our ... God*."

To confess that Christ is Lord over all, and to confess that He is seated at God's right hand governing this world, means too that He is Lord over all authorities on earth. Said Jesus to His disciples, "**All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth**" (*Matthew 28:18*). Peter also testified of Christ's Lordship in Acts 2:36 where we read, "... *let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.*" In the midst of the oppressive circumstances of his day, deBres confesses that all governments come from God, including the government responsible for the persecution he and his congregation had to endure.

In his opening sentence deBres confessed that it is God who ordains "*kings, princes and civil officers*" to their offices. By this deBres meant all kings and rules, including the king of his day, King Phillip II of Spain who authorised persecution against deBres and his congregation. To confess that King Phillip II was appointed by God was no small confession for deBres to make.

"BECAUSE OF THE DEPRAVITY OF MANKIND"

"(God) *wants the world to be governed by laws and policies, in order that the licentiousness of men be restrained and that everything be conducted among them in good order.*" Did deBres have any particular people in mind when he wrote about "the licentiousness of men"? Was he thinking, for example, of the seditious Anabaptists or perhaps the evil Roman Catholics? No. DeBres did not write this concerning some specific people, but concerning all people. That is: this statement applied to deBres himself and his congregation members, and it applies equally to me. It applies to both regenerated and unregenerated people. DeBres had in mind the weaknesses, shortcomings and sinfulness of all people. Because sin remains in this broken world, there remains need for authorities. This is, then, a humble confession, based on the reality of abiding general depravity (see Lord's Days 2 and 3). As Romans 13:3,4 states, the government exists on account of man's evil works. "**For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practises evil.**" These words from Paul were written to the "saints" of Rome (Romans 1:7).

In the face of the licentiousness remaining in the hearts of people, authorities are very much a gift of God's *grace*. By means of authorities, the Lord God would restrain this licentiousness, so that in turn life together may be possible, yes, and His church may be gathered (cf I Timothy 2:1f). DeBres captured this notion of authorities being God's gift with his use of the word 'gracious'; deBres speaks in the opening line of the article of "our *gracious* God".

A COMMAND TO ACCEPT AND SUBMIT

What deBres confessed in the midst of his specific situation is a demonstration of how the 5th commandment must be put into concrete practice. We are to live according to the instruction we receive in 1 Peter 2:13-17, namely, "... **submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by Him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men - as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God. Honour all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king.**" Here is a command for submission to the authorities set over us. Submission does not necessarily mean that we agree with all government policies, nor does it mean that we must obey the Government should that require us to act contrary to any of God's commandments (see Acts 5:29). Here is rather a command that we adopt an attitude of acceptance and humility towards the Government. We are to refrain from complaining or protesting. Our Prime Minister today has been appointed to his position by God, my Saviour. God is Sovereign and the Prime Minister is God's servant. My acceptance of the Prime Minister is not dependent upon whether or not I like his policies; it is dependent rather on the fact that my Saviour

has entrusted the office to him. This rules out any feelings of bitterness towards the Government on my part.

In the face of mistreatment from the authorities, it is for God's people to take this treatment patiently (cf I Peter 2:20ff). Certainly it is not for us to rise up in opposition to the authorities in an effort to overthrow them. Instead, as did Christ, it is for us to entrust ourselves and our circumstances to God, believing that He sovereignly rules as He judges best.

What must our attitude be towards movements such as 'Green Peace'? Their environmental concerns are, to large degree, acceptable. However, the movement as a whole certainly does not display an attitude of respect or submission to authorities. Rather, they display a spirit that has much in common with that of the Anabaptists of deBres' day; they are largely revolutionaries, and stoop to any means to achieve their goals. That reality rules out any Christian sympathy for Green Peace.

Their revolutionary attitude to government is prevalent in society at large today. The people of our land in general do not want to know of any accountability to God, and hence do not want to acknowledge either that Governments are appointed by Him. This is where we are to show that we are different. If the Government's policies are bad policies in our view, then we do not show this by way of demonstrations, protests, rebellion or revolt, but we quietly and humbly inform the Government of this and point out where there is room for change according to God's Word. Meanwhile we obey, publicly and privately, whatever laws the Governments enact.

PRAYER FOR THE GOVERNMENT

Since the authorities are placed over us by none else than God, and are His ministers for our good, it is fitting and proper that Christians pray for those in to whom God has entrusted a position of authority. This is the express command of God through Paul to Christians of every time and place. *"Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth"* (I Timothy 2:1-4). In a time of decreased respect and appreciation for authorities, it is for God's people to be diligent in remembering God's servants before the throne of grace. Nobody else will do it.

May the Lord bless the authorities of our land, to the salvation of many.

ARTICLE 37

THE LAST JUDGMENT

"COME LORD JESUS!"

DeBres concluded his confession with an article concerning the last judgment. This was a conscious decision on his part, for his situation (and that of his congregation) was one of persecution; their's was a situation which made life on earth difficult to endure. It was a situation in which the content of this article can be described as a cry, a plea for an end to suffering. Hence our article's concluding words, "... *we look forward to that great day with a great longing to enjoy to the full the promises of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!*" This is the cry of Christ's Church, His Bride. DeBres and his congregation, and we today too, pray with an eager longing for Christ to come soon.

DELIVERANCE FROM SATAN'S HATRED AND PERSECUTION

It is not too difficult for us to understand why deBres expressed his longing for Christ's return the way he did. His life was characterised by insecurity and tension on account of persecution for his faith. Although our circumstances today differ markedly from those of deBres (that is: we enjoy much freedom and live relatively free of worry), this confession is also to be the earnest confession of every Christian. DeBres felt persecution in a very physical way. We for our part do not experience physical persecution, and yet we are no less hated and persecuted in our day; the devil and his demons never grant us a break. What we read in 1 Peter 5:8 applies no less today than it did in deBres' day, namely, "*be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.*" I too am hated by the devil. In Revelation 12:7 we read of the war in heaven between Michael and his angels and the devil and his angels. At the end of this war Satan was cast out of heaven. However, though defeated, Satan is no less active, and Revelation 12:12 warns us, "*Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time.*" These words create for us a picture of the devil in desperation. He is out to destroy the Church, but he knows that his is a battle against time. His time is running out. Hence his desperation to attack the church of Jesus Christ, and every Christian in the world.

The tactics adopted by Satan to destroy the Church vary. In Ephesians 6:11 Paul writes about "the wiles of the devil". The point of the term 'wiles' is that the devil is exceedingly crafty, treacherous, deceptive. In deBres' day he persecuted the Church in a very physical way. In our land today, his attacks come at us in a different way. Though we are not persecuted physically today, we are equally hated by him. Yes, his attacks against us are more crafty, less obvious, more devious. We can detect something of his hatred in his attacks on our marriages, in the depressions which get us down spiritually, in the sins that keep haunting us, etc. Around us the allurements to sin (think of materialism, one's 'right' to self-fulfilment and self-gratification, etc) are countless, and very tempting. Although there is much that we are able to enjoy in this life today, we know from Scripture that this life is a life of sorrow, a "veil of tears," or as the Form for the Baptism of infants (*Book of Praise*, p.586) describes it in the prayer following Baptism, "*nothing more than a constant death.*" This is how Scripture typifies this life. In view of this, the confession contained in this article comes close to our hearts too.

THE REALITY OF CHRIST'S COMING

DeBres commences this article with a statement that Christ is coming. "... *we believe, according to the Word of God, that when the time, ordained by the Lord but unknown to all creatures, has come and the number of the elect is complete, our Lord Jesus Christ will come from heaven ...*" This statement is based on what Scripture itself says in 1 Thessalonians 4:14-18, "... *For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God....*" The disciples received the same message from the two angels at the time of Christ's ascension into heaven. "*Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw him go into heaven*" (Acts 1:11). DeBres, on the basis of what he knew from Scripture, was convinced that this world has a future. This future is not some earthly

utopia, but the glory of the Saviour's coming.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF A GLORIOUS FUTURE

Such is the glory of Christ's return that *"those who will have died before that time will arise out of the earth, as their spirits are once again united with their own bodies in which they lived."* So many of us have buried loved ones at the Fremantle cemetery. However, on the last day, those whom we have buried will -Yes, indeed!- hear the cry of the Angel and will arise from their coffins. *"Those who will then still be alive will not die as the others but will be changed in the twinkling of an eye from perishable to imperishable... The faithful and elect will be crowned with glory and honour ... God will wipe away every tear from their eye ... the Lord will cause them to possess such a glory as the heart of man could never conceive."* This is a confession of a future blessedness beyond compare. Here is what I, together with the church, confess concerning the life everlasting in the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 22, namely, *"I shall after this life possess perfect blessedness, such as no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived - a blessedness in which to praise God forever."* "This is the future that awaits you and me," said deBres to his congregation. "We have our eyes set on something far superior to freedom from persecution. We look forward to a future in which we will be able to praise God forever. Therefore do not abandon your faith and hope, for you have something glorious awaiting you." Truly, it's an exciting perspective!

Living from the perspective of this glorious future implies some consequences for life today:

1) Why be anxious about the future? Isn't my Lord sovereign? With Article 36 we confessed Christ to be Lord of all. *"Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool"* (Isaiah 66:1). This perspective gives great peace in the face of all the troubles of this world. A glorious future awaits us. Many different philosophical movements these days make offers of 'heaven on earth;' for example, communism, New Age Movement. However, Christ has much more to offer, namely, Paradise restored. That's the future I confidently await, even as wars and famines and persecutions break out over the earth.

2) Today Christ is busy, working towards the day of His second coming. The Governments in office today are appointed by God, serving God's agenda for this world. They all have a role to play in God's plan of hastening the arrival of the last day. For that reason I am content and feel at ease, despite rising heathendom amongst the authorities of the (western) world, for I know that my Saviour is in full control of all things, working towards His coming. When He comes, He will put an end to all sorrow and the difficulties that be.

3) What keeps me busy today? Am I preoccupied with the things of this life? Is my own little empire of house, car, holidays, material wealth and personal pleasures my first priority? Given the fact that my Saviour soon returns, these things pale into insignificance. In fact, when Christ returns, all these things will be of no use to me; all the things of this life will be consumed by fire - my house, car, furniture, wardrobe included. The fact that I live in expectation of the Saviour's return determines my priorities and actions today.

THE LAST DAY / THE LAST JUDGMENT

As to all the events that will take place on the day of Christ's return, deBres does not go into much detail. Rather, he selects from Scripture those elements clearly revealed, and which are important and comforting for his congregation at the time. These elements are equally important and comforting to us today.

Concerning the notion of judgment, deBres writes, *"Christ will declare Himself Judge of the living and the dead and set this old world (including all my possessions!) afire in order to purge it. Then all people, men, women, and children, who ever lived, from the beginning of the world to the end, will appear in person before this great Judge."* (Here 'the dead' can be a reference to those who are physically dead or spiritually dead; 'the living' can be a reference to those who are physically or spiritually alive.) *"Then the books will be opened and the dead will be judged according to what they have done in this world,*

whether good or evil. Indeed, **all people will render account** for every careless word they utter, which the world regards as mere jest and amusement."

DeBres' confession concerning the last judgment comes from the Bible. Jesus spoke about this judgment in Matthew 25:31-33: "*When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. **All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides His sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand and the goats on the left.***" Likewise, in 2 Corinthians 5:10 we read, "*For **we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.***"

Each person still alive on the last day and each person that ever lived (what an incredibly large group that will be!) will appear before Christ the Judge. We have our many questions as to how it will be practicable for God to judge so many people; viewed from our perspective this would take forever. However, considering that God was able to create the world in just a moment, we need not puzzle our minds about how long such a judgment will take. We do better to believe what Scripture reveals, that all people, including myself, Nero, Hitler, my neighbour, my mother, etc, will have to appear before Christ and give account of every idle word spoken and every deed performed in this life.

EVERY IDLE WORD...

The thought that on Judgment Day we will be called to give account for all our sins can make us feel somewhat uncomfortable; we'd rather not have to give account for our (secret) wrongs. We need to bear in mind, though, that Judgment Day means something totally different for believers than for unbelievers. On the basis of Christ's merits the believers, though they cannot explain away their sins, will be able to point to the blood of Christ. "Yes Lord, they were the sins I committed, but You sent Christ so that they could be forgiven. Christ satisfied Your justice; Christ took upon Himself the punishment I deserved." And Christ will be there to plead for His own. God's response will be, "Yes, your sins were washed away; enter into my Kingdom." For the believers, God's judgment seat spells out God's mercy and glory.

The unbelievers, though, will have to admit to the sins they'll be accused of, and they will not be able to give to God any satisfactory explanation or excuse. For that reason God will say to them, "go into the outer darkness prepared for the devil and his angels; I do not know you." They did not want God, and refused to obey Him. Therefore God will send them away into everlasting perdition (see Matthew 25:31-46).

God's judgment of the unbelievers will be a public testimony of God's justice. Concerning this justice we confess in the Catechism, Lord's Day 4.11, that "**(God's) justice requires that sin committed against the most high majesty of God also be punished with the most severe, that is, with everlasting, punishment of body and soul.**" All men will then see that God is indeed just, and worship Him on account of it.

As far as the unbelievers are concerned, "*the thought of this judgment is **horrible and dreadful.***" From our perspective, the thought of having to give account of our sins before God is embarrassing. Yet deBres writes, "*the thought of this judgment ... is **a great joy and comfort to the righteous and the elect.***" This is so, because the focus of the last day is God, and not us. Central to the day is not my possible embarrassment; central to the day is the God's glory and praise. On that day God's glory will be revealed to the full; then I shall know in the fullest sense possible what kind of a God I have. For that reason I can truly look forward to that day without any fear or apprehension. I need not be afraid of what 'the books' will reveal concerning me, for I believe that on the last day too God will be to me the same God He has been for me while I lived on this earth; that is, for Jesus' sake He will not deal with me according to my sins, but will show me His mercy.

ARE OUR SINS NOT FORGIVEN??

The confession that the books will be opened does not contradict those passages of Scripture which tell us that God has removed our sins far from us and that He no longer 'remembers' our sins. For example in

Psalm 103:12 we read, "For as far as east is from the west, so far has He **removed** our transgressions from us." Likewise, in Micah 7:19 we read, "(You) will **cast all our sins into the depths of the sea,**" and in Isaiah 43:25 we read, "I, (God) even I, am He who **blots out** your transgressions for My own sake; and I will not remember your sins." These texts all speak of sins forgiven by God, sins which have been removed from us, sins that are gone. Yet on the last day "the books will be opened", and we shall have to give account of every idle word we have uttered. Do these two thoughts not contradict? Does the thought of the opening of the books not imply that God does not really forgive our sins??

The references to 'removing' sins and 'blotting out' transgressions do not mean that God *forgets* our sins in the sense that He has a memory lapse regarding our transgressions. When God says that He will not remember our sins, He means that by His mercy He will not treat us according to those sins; He will not hold against us the sins of which we have been forgiven. Meanwhile, they remain recorded in God's book. Yet this should not make us dread the opening of God's books on Judgment Day, for our sins are not recorded to our judgment, but are recorded for the greater glory of the Saviour.

However, sins of which I do not repent remain between God and myself. God demands that we go on bended knees for all our sins. If I am aware of any deeds in my life which are sin I must also confess them as such to God. Should I refuse to do so, and cling to them, then they will be held against me on Judgment Day.

THE CAUSE OF THE SON OF GOD

In Article 37 deBres directs the attention of his congregation to the wonderful future that Scripture promises. It is a future one need not be afraid of because Christ has removed from God's Judgment all threat of condemnation for the believers, and hence it will be a day in which His glory will be manifest. DeBres also includes in his confession what will happen to those who were persecuting the faithful, the followers of the Reformation. These evildoers, writes deBres, will be hounded forever. "*And so for good reason the thought of this judgment is horrible and dreadful to the wicked and evildoers but it is a great joy and comfort to the righteous and elect. Their innocence will be known to all and **they will see the terrible vengeance that God will bring upon the wicked who persecuted, oppressed, and tormented them in this world.***" "Shortly the tables will be turned," deBres told his congregation. Those who today persecute the obedient will on that day recognise that the small, persecuted, scorned church of Doornik was in fact the work of Jesus Christ. "Today we have nothing, but tomorrow the situation will be reversed." This gives no reason to gloat, but is rather a call to remain faithful and to persevere in the face of hardships, for these hardships are but temporary. We today are also to heed the call to be diligent in faith, hope and love - never mind our circumstances. The countless of the world who today deride the Faith and the faithful will tomorrow admit that the Faith is true, and the faithful were right.

This perspective is then also a call for repentance to those who persecute the Church.

THE TIMING OF CHRIST'S RETURN

When will Christ return? Article 37 doesn't answer this question. DeBres writes, "*We believe, according to the Word of God, that **when the time, ordained by the Lord but unknown to all creatures, has come and the number of the elect is complete, our Lord Jesus Christ will come from heaven, bodily and visibly, as He ascended, with great glory and majesty.***" DeBres doesn't answer the question of when it is that Christ will return. The timing of His return is unknown to us.

It is true that the Bible speaks of what is commonly known as "the signs of the times". "*And you will hear of **wars and rumours of wars.** See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For **nation will rise up against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places**" (Matthew 24:6,7). Concerning John's vision of the coming of the great day of God's wrath we read in Revelation 6:12-14, "*and **the sun became black as a sackcloth of hair, and the moon became like blood. And the stars of heaven fell to the earth, ... Then the sky receded as a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island was moved out of its place.***" Yet passages as these would not have us believe (contrary to the teaching of Dispensationalists)*

that various events must yet happen before Christ can return. The Scripture says emphatically that "**of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only.... Therefore, you also be ready for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect**" (Matthew 24:30,36-44). Christ then illustrates this message with the parable of the ten virgins who went out to meet the bridegroom, and the parable of the talents. Both parables have the same message, namely, be ready. "**Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming**" (Matthew 25:13). The wars and famines and earthquakes mentioned in Matthew 24 characterise the entire New Testament dispensation, and serve as continuing reminders to God's people that the Saviour is coming; His footsteps, as it were, can be heard in events as these. It should be clear to our minds that Jesus can certainly come back at any moment.

When Christ returns we will all be doing our regular, daily activities. In Christ's day it was common for men to work in the field and for women to grind wheat at the mill (part of the daily bread making procedure). Christ made reference to these two very common daily occupations when He spoke of the day of His return. "... *as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. Then two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill: the one will be taken and the other left. Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming*" (Matthew 24:42). The message here is this: when Christ returns we will be engaged in the chores of daily life, be it our daily occupation, washing the dishes or mowing the lawn. That is: life will be following its normal course, Christ's return will be unexpected. Said Paul to the Thessalonians, "*For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night*" (1 Thessalonians 5:2). Earthquakes, wars, and pestilences are events that characterise the whole New Testament dispensation which awaits Christ's second coming. Let us make no mistake: Christ can come back tonight.

SUSPENCE

This reality brings with it immediate consequences for my life today:

1. To believe in Christ as my Lord and Saviour is an urgent matter. I cannot afford to delay this. Living in the expectation of Christ is not enough. I must believe in Him now and so be ready to meet him as Judge without any fear of condemnation.
2. Awareness of Christ's imminent return determines how I live. It makes me reflect on what really matters to me today; it helps me set my priorities right. Conscious of the fact that Christ may well come back tonight, should I then work so very hard to build my little kingdom?! After all, when Christ returns it will all 'go up in smoke' anyway (see II Peter 3:10). Knowing that He comes back soon, I am to engage myself in the tasks He gives me to do in His kingdom, and while I do my work today I plan for tomorrow, certainly. But as I work, I keep one eye on the clouds watching for the coming of my Lord and Saviour.

When the people of God do not look forward earnestly for the return of the Saviour, the Church has become this-worldly, too comfortable in the world of today. It certainly is true that today the Lord gives us a task on this earth, in this society. But this earth, this society, this country is not our homeland. While we work diligently at the stations God has given us in daily life, we look forward to a better land - the New Jerusalem coming soon from heaven to earth. See Philippians 3:20, Hebrews 11:8-16.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!
