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THE GOSPEL AND ITS EXTENT





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Tom Nettles

Introduction

Grace and Its Extent

Chapter XX of the Second London Confession

This edition of the *Founders Journal* is given to the substance of Chapter 20, “Of the Gospel, and of the extent of the Grace Thereof.” We begin with a suggested expansion of this chapter. I have suggested keeping the article [20] intact and adding some sections that expand related ideas of paramount importance. Every paragraph is essentially intact to maintain the flow and logic of the entire theological system that undergirds it. Since the confession predates the hyper-Calvinist movement of the eighteenth century, this subject matter calls for pertinent statements that recognize that specific challenge. We are convinced, and rightly so, that hyper-Calvinism is not the system of the 17th century Baptists and that the *Second London Confession* is fully consistent with a missionary theology. Our task, therefore, is to implant within the appropriate article the missionary theology that naturally flows from the entire confession. I have tried to suggest a wording within article 20 that clearly states the mature missionary theology as expressed by Fuller, Carey, Pearce, Sutcliff, Robert Hall, Sr., John Ryland, Jr., and Abraham Booth.

Also included are exposition articles by Ryan Denton and Frank Jones. Ryan was a Southern Baptist pastor on the Navajo Reservation before starting Christ in the Wild Ministries, which he has directed since 2016. He is co-author of *A Certain Sound: A Primer on Open Air*

Preaching and is a Th.M student at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary. He holds additional postgraduate degrees from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and St. John's College. He lives in El Paso, TX with his wife and son. John Franklin Jones, a native of South Mississippi, resides in East Tennessee with his wife, Kathy. He has two children and five grandchildren. He did undergraduate work at Clarke Memorial College, William Carey College, Ouachita University and received his M.Div. and Ph.D. from Mid America Baptist Theological Seminary. Fifty-seven plus years in ministry, he has served in the pastorate, other church staff positions, short-term missions settings, and cross-cultural language ministries. He has also taught at several institutions and currently is Adjunct Instructor of Theology (online), Liberty School of Divinity, Lynchburg, VA. Frank and Kathy are members at Calvary Baptist Church, Bristol, TN.

Two articles do not give exegesis of this chapter but are theological reflections on issues that are suggested by the concerns of Chapter 20. Bob Gonzales contributes an article on "The Saving Design of God's Common Grace." This is vitally connected with the relation between "the works of creation, or Providence, with the light of nature" that figures so prominently in this chapter. Though God has not given the accompaniment of effectual grace to these manifestations of his goodness, nevertheless, Gonzales argues that Romans 2:4 indicates that they still carry real evidence that God has designed these things to bring sinners to repentance. Bob is the academic dean at Reformed Baptist Theological Seminary in Sacramento, California. Sam Waldron has contributed a review of J. V. Fesko's *Reforming Apologetics*. This also engages the relation between reason, general revelation, special revelation, natural theology, presuppositional apologetics, and the necessity of effectual grace. Waldron has a Ph D from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, is an experienced pastor, and is president of Covenant Baptist Theological Seminary in Owensboro, KY.

—Tom J. Nettles



Tom Nettles

1689 Chapter XX Addition

I transcribe the text of the chapter with additions. My suggested additions are in italics. Each paragraph is followed with a bracketed section referring to places in the confession that warrant the added text. Also, I have added proof texts that support the textual additions.

1. The covenant of works being broken by sin, and made unprofitable unto life, God was pleased to give forth the promise of Christ, the seed of the woman, as the means of calling the elect, and begetting in them faith and repentance; in this promise the gospel, as to the substance of it, was revealed, and [is] therein effectual for the conversion and salvation of sinners. [Gen. 3:15; Re. 13:8] *This promise of grace assumes the creation truth that mankind is a moral creature thus capable of affection for God and volitional doxology toward God. God's purpose, therefore, of restoring an elect people to His favor through Christ and reinstating Himself as the sole source and object of their praise and worship does not exclude any of fallen humanity from the duty to pursue the ends of the Gospel [Ephesians 1:9-12; Phil. 1:9-11; 1 Timothy 1:8-11, 15-17.]*
 - [Compare Chapter 4, paragraph 2 entire but particularly “rendering them fit unto that life to God for which they were created.” Also, Compare chapter 7, paragraph 2 which states “Moreover, man having brought himself under the curse of the law by his fall, it pleased the Lord to make a covenant of grace, wherein he freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved; and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life, his Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe”]

2. This promise of Christ, and salvation by Him, is revealed only by the Word of God; neither do the works of creation or providence, with the light of nature, make discovery of Christ, or of grace by him, so much as in a general or obscure way; much less that men destitute of the revelation of Him by the promise or gospel, should be enabled thereby to attain saving faith or repentance. [Rom. 1:16; 10:14-17; Prov. 29:18; Isa. 25:7; 60:2, 3] *God provides, therefore, by command and providence, that proclamation of the full counsel of God be made to all men as sinners. The law initially written on the heart, as well as the moral law revealed to Israel, fully complies with the grace of the Gospel. This reality most forcefully implies that Christ's Gospel be proclaimed to all fallen humanity. The decree of salvation for the elect of every tongue, tribe, nation, involves of necessity the proclamation of both the Gospel and the accompanying duties of repentance from sin and faith in the Lord Jesus to all men everywhere with the general promise that all who so believe will certainly be saved [Revelation 5:12-14; 7; Acts 17:24-31; Romans 10:12, 13]*
- [compare chapter 2, paragraph 2 “to him is due from angels and men, whatsoever worship, or obedience, as creatures they owe unto the Creator, and whatever he is further pleased to require of them.” also compare chapter 5, paragraph 6, “whereby it comes to pass that they harden themselves, under those means which God useth for the softening of others.” Also compare chapter 19, paragraph 2, “The same law that was first written in the heart of man continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness after the fall, and was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, etc.” paragraph 5, “The moral law doth for ever bind all, as well justified persons as others . . . neither doth Christ in the Gospel any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation.” And paragraph 7 “Neither are the aforementioned uses of the law contrary to the grace of the Gospel, but do sweetly comply with it, the Spirit of Christ subduing and enabling the will of man to do that freely and cheerfully which the will of God, revealed in the law, requireth to be done.”
3. The revelation of the Gospel unto sinners, made in divers times and by sundry parts, with the addition of promises and precepts for the obedience required therein, as to the nations and persons to whom it is granted, is merely of the sovereign will and good pleasure of God; not being annexed by virtue of any promise to the due improvement of men's natural abilities, by virtue of common light received without it, which none ever did make, or can do so; and therefore in all ages, the preaching of the gospel has been granted unto persons and nations, as to the *extension* or *limiting* of it, in great variety, according to the counsel of the will of God. *His secret will and good pleasure in this wise providence, however, is not the rule of our action; but rather his church must be*

governed by his commission of the gospel to all nations as the means of their calling and the consequent apostolic action of evangelization of both the circumcision and the uncircumcision. The apostolic work of careful dissemination, defense, and confirmation of the Gospel among all nations bore fruit only by virtue of the sovereign, inscrutable, and insuperable work of the Spirit embedding the preached word with vital power, and at the same time manifested the apostolic understanding of his command to make disciples. [Acts 13:48; Phil. 1:6; Col. 1:3-6; 1 Thes. 1:4-7; 2 Thes. 2:13-15; 2 Tim. 2:8-10; James 1:17, 18; 1 Peter 1:22-25]

- Elements of this original article give direct refutation to the Arminian contention that fallen humanity by virtue of universal prevenient grace may respond positively to natural revelation and thus gain God’s favor for a further hearing of the gospel or even perhaps having their natural religion account to them as virtual faith in Christ, though they never have heard the gospel. {See chapter 10, paragraph 4 on this account also.} Thomas Grantham, a general Baptist, specifically taught this and taught that apart from such prevenient grace, sinners could not be held responsible for their refusal to comply with the implications of natural revelation or of the preached gospel. Compare chapter 3, paragraph 1 – “nor yet is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away.” Paragraph 6. ‘foreordained all the means thereunto.” Chapter 5, paragraph 2 “yet by the same providence he ordereth them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either, necessarily, freely, or contingently.” Chapter 10, paragraph 1 – “by his word and Spirit . . . enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God;” paragraph 4 “Much less can men that receive not the Christian religion be saved.” Also chapter 14, paragraph 1, “The grace of faith . . . is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word.”

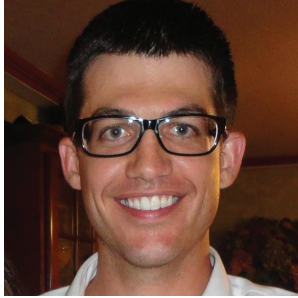
4. *We, therefore, affirm and have joyful confidence in these indivisible truths: the gospel is the only means of revealing Christ and saving grace, and is, as such abundantly sufficient thereunto; yet that men who are dead in trespasses may be born again, quickened or regenerated, there is moreover necessary, beyond the mere persuasive power of bare truth, an effectual insuperable work of the Holy Spirit upon the whole soul, for the producing in them a new spiritual life; without which no other means will effect their conversion unto God. [Ps. 110:3; 1 Cor. 2:14; Eph. 1:19, 20; John 6:44; 2 Cor. 4, 4, 6]*

- Compare also chapter X on effectual calling paragraph 1: “enlightening [sic] their minds, spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God;” also paragraph

4; “although they may be called by the Ministry of the word, and may have some common operations of the Spirit, yet not being effectually drawn by the Father, they neither will nor can truly come to Christ”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Tom Nettles is retired but presently teaches as a Senior Professor at SBTS in Louisville. He is an active member at LaGrange Baptist Church in LaGrange, KY. He and his wife Margaret have three adult children and five grandchildren.



Ryan Denton

The Gospel and Its Extent

Introduction

Chapter twenty of the Second London Baptist Confession is about the gospel. This is a chapter where we cannot use commentaries written for the Westminster Confession since it is taken from the Puritan Congregationalists' Savoy Declaration (1658). The Westminster Confession does not have a chapter committed exclusively to the gospel, so one was added, even though the material contained in chapter twenty can be found throughout the confession. On the surface such a chapter on the gospel may seem relatively mundane or obvious, especially in light of our own Reformed culture's resurgence of gospel-centered preaching and evangelism. But when looking further into the language of this chapter, it stands out as one of the most exciting and unique in the entire confession because of what it claims about the extent and, by default, the limits of the gospel, as well as its prophetic insight into our own culture's tendency to use pragmatism instead of biblical means when dealing with the lost. Such a chapter only gives more aptitude to the richest Reformed confession in existence.

How Far Does the Gospel Reach?

Whenever one speaks of the extent of something, it is a tacit acknowledgement to the limits or boundaries of that thing. Such is the case here with regards to the gospel. Although paragraph one points to the gospel as something "revealed and made effectual for the conversion and salvation of sinners," paragraph three recognizes that this gospel will not be preached to, much less believed in by, every person. It is true that "the gospel

has been revealed to sinners in various times and in different places,” but it is also true the gospel has not been revealed to everyone. Hordes of people have come into the world and died without ever hearing about Christ. So, while on the one hand the confession acknowledges that the gospel will be rejected by numerous people to whom it is preached,¹ on the other hand it makes clear that many won’t even have such a chance. This is what makes the gospel itself so precious. This is what makes hearing the gospel such a privilege. Such limitation of the gospel will be seen as offensive to many modern Christians. Even more offensive, however, will be the reason why so many people are overlooked with the gospel: “The particular nations and individuals who are granted this revelation are chosen solely according to the sovereign will and good pleasure of God.”

Such a sentence is as remarkable as it is biblical. God called a man living in Harran to be the father of the faith (Gen 12:1) rather than, say, an Egyptian. Paul was kept from going to Asia and Bithynia with the gospel by the Holy Spirit in favor of Macedonia (Acts 16:6-10). Reformed believers are accustomed to talk about God saving some and not others according to His sovereign will alone. But how many of us are accustomed to think in the categories here brought out by the confession? Even the nations and neighborhoods to which the gospel goes is done so “according to the counsel of the will of God” alone. And, similar to God’s election of some unto everlasting life without any recourse to foreseen merit in them, so it is here regarding where the gospel goes: “The choice does not depend on any promise to those who demonstrate good stewardship of their natural abilities based on common light received apart from the gospel.” The confession even goes a step further, pointing out that “no one has ever done this nor can anyone do so,” referring us to Romans 1:18-32 as a proof text of the sinking degradation of humanity.

It is important to note that the content of this chapter was written in part to address the heresy of Deism, which stresses the sufficiency of human reason and natural revelation in contrast to the biblical teaching of total depravity and the need for special revelation. For our purposes here, the confession is pointing out that the gospel does not go to cities or houses that are more pious than others, or that evidence more natural ability for godliness than others. The confession admits that such “natural ability” is impossible: “No one has ever done this nor can anyone do so.” This is why God has every right to leave some countries destitute of the gospel while deciding to shower other places with it. He has every right to keep back missionaries from one city or village while opening up floodgates into another. The West once saw outbursts of spiritual blessing while the Orient languished in perversion. Today it seems the Orient is seeing genuine revival while the West atrophies under naturalism, materialism, and a growing surge of witchcraft and the occult.²

If we consider America specifically, rural America is being overlooked by many church planters and mission organizations in favor of faster, more appealing urban areas.³ Geographically, it goes without saying that America's coasts are typically seen as "less Christian" than areas more inland. What can account for this? Where are we to turn for an explanation? The confession gives us the answer: "In every age the preaching of the gospel to individuals and nations has been granted in widely varying degrees of expansion and contraction, according to the counsel of the will of God." During the Reformation and Puritan-era, there was an expansion of gospel preaching in the West. Today, in general, there is a contraction.

Just because God determines where the gospel goes, it does not mean we should not do everything in our power to reach overlooked places. Missionaries and preachers are often burdened about certain locations. This can be a good sign that God is desiring to see the gospel go forth into those areas. Even when there is hardship or roadblocks regarding such enterprises, it does not always mean it is God shutting the door. William Carey saw little support from others as he was preparing to go to India.⁴ Once there, at one point he said, "I am very fruitless and almost useless but the Word and the attributes of God are my hope, and my confidence, and my joy, and I trust that his glorious designs will undoubtedly be answered."⁵ His wife went insane. A decade went by before anyone was saved. But eventually the gospel brought a harvest. Although God does keep the gospel from penetrating certain areas, difficulties or trials do not always indicate that God is shutting the door. Each missionary or preacher will have to determine whether God is the one burdening their heart for a certain area, but once convinced, it is the duty of the missionary or preacher to stay the course and preach the gospel.

The Necessity of Gospel Proclamation

In an astounding way, the confession manages in four short paragraphs to bring out the relationship between God's sovereignty and the importance of gospel proclamation to the lost. Perhaps most importantly, though subtly, it gives us the motive for evangelizing. In the first paragraph, the confession alludes to God as the first to proclaim the gospel: "God was pleased to proclaim the promise of Christ, the seed of the woman, as the means of calling the elect and producing in them faith and repentance." It is therefore fitting that we follow in His steps. God Himself was the first evangelist to the human race. He "was pleased" to herald the gospel to people who had recently broken the covenant of works. That God did not blot out the human race but instead proclaimed to them the promise of a Savior is the

great mystery that Peter speaks of as something even angels long to look into (1 Pet 1:12). It indicates that God, motivated by love, had already determined to send “Christ, the seed of the woman, as the means of calling the elect.” This promise was the same for both Old Testament and New Testament believers. Samuel Waldron is right to point out that

The unity of the message of salvation in all ages is confirmed. Men have always been saved in the same way and by the same gospel. In the Old Testament and in the New Testament that gospel was revealed. Every man ever saved was saved by its means. This corrects the indecisive Christian who wants to say that men were always saved by Christ, yet has also been taught that somehow it was different in the Old Testament. For such we have this assurance, men have always been saved in the same way—full stop!⁶

Chapter twenty also gives us the reason for why gospel outreach is so necessary, and why “the gospel is the only outward means of revealing Christ and saving grace.” Natural revelation alone is never enough for an unbeliever “to attain saving faith or repentance.” This again is meant to combat the claims of Deism, but it is just as relevant in our own culture. Naturalism, relativism, existentialism, and even the occult all attempt to elevate the authority of man to the place where specific, divine revelation is not needed for salvation. Though everyone knows God exists (Rom 1:18-32), neither creation nor the conscience can reveal “Christ or grace through Him, even in a general or obscure way.” For a helpful commentary on this point, consider chapter ten, paragraph four of the confession: “Much less can any be saved who do not receive the Christian religion, no matter how diligently they live their lives according to the light of nature and the teachings of the religion they profess.” This establishes the importance of actual gospel proclamation. The unbeliever must “hear” about Christ (Rom 10:14) in order to believe in Him, but in order to hear about Christ, someone must go and preach the gospel. Paul summarizes this when writing to the Romans: “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17). Looking at the stars won’t reveal Christ. Spending hours in contemplative chanting won’t do it either. It requires a human being going to another human being and declaring the gospel.

This theme of hearing the gospel is persistent throughout all of Paul’s letters. When writing to the Thessalonians he says, “For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe” (1 Thess 2:13). And again, when writing to the Galatians, Paul says, “Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith” (Gal 3:2)? And again, to the Ephesians, he says, “In Him you also trusted, after you heard the

word of truth, the gospel of your salvation” (Eph 1:13). This is where biblical evangelism comes in: “How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?” (Rom 10:14). John Owen agrees, noting, “The way principally insisted on by the apostles was, by preaching the word itself unto them in the evidence and demonstration of the Spirit.”⁷ Even when derided or imprisoned by unbelievers, “Yet they desisted not from pursuing their work in the same way; whereunto God gave success.”⁸ This is what makes this chapter so imperative for our own day, since it verifies that human reason is insufficient for salvation.

The Sufficiency of the Gospel

The last paragraph of chapter twenty tells us that “the gospel is abundantly sufficient” and is “the only outward means of revealing Christ and saving grace.” This is important for us to remember in a culture that relies so heavily on pragmatism in missions and evangelism.⁹ Many Christians claim to believe what the Bible says about the power of the gospel to save, but when it comes to evangelism you rarely see them living this out. This includes some Reformed Christians. Many will pray for people to be saved without ever sharing the gospel with the people they pray for. They will fly thousands of miles to build someone a house, trying to “share” the gospel by their deeds. They will spend months trying to establish a “relationship” with someone before sharing the demands of Christ. But that is not what we find in the Scriptures.

Consider for example the Acts of the Apostles. Far from believing humans were capable of receiving the truth of Christ from “the works of creation and providence, when assisted only by the light of nature,” they were adamant about doing everything in their power to communicate the gospel to everyone with whom they came into contact. The following are verbs used in the Acts of the Apostles to describe the work of evangelism: to testify (Acts 2:40), to proclaim (Acts 4:2), to preach the gospel (Acts 5:42), to herald (Acts 8:5), to teach (Acts 4:2), to argue (Acts 17:2), to dispute (Acts 9:29), to confound (Acts 9:22), to prove (Acts 17:3), to confute powerfully (Acts 18:28), to persuade (Acts 17:4). This is why the proclamation of the gospel must be our aim, since “the gospel is the power of God to salvation” (Rom 1:16) and “is the only outward means of revealing Christ and saving grace.”

John Stott, writing in his early days, recognized that “nothing hinders evangelism today more than the widespread loss of confidence in the truth, relevance and power of the gospel.”¹⁰ Walter Chantry points out, “Our evangelism must be based upon a dependence on the Lord. Our hope of results must be in Him, not in man’s will or in any other faculty of our hearer. But it pleases God to raise dead sinners through the foolishness of Gospel preaching.”¹¹ Biblical evangelism is getting the gospel to people. People must be exposed to the person and work of Jesus Christ. Any other “method” can be contributed to a lack of faith in the gospel and a disbelief in the sufficiency of the Bible, which alone should be our guide for how to “do” evangelism.

This paragraph also gives us the reason why the gospel is abundantly sufficient for its purpose of “revealing Christ and saving grace.” It is because God alone can save sinners, and He does so through the “effectual, irresistible work of the Holy Spirit in every part of their souls to produce in them a new spiritual life.” Modern Christianity often uses pragmatic techniques in evangelism because they have unbiblical views of man and conversion. Arminian and semi-Pelagian views of the will, sin, and human nature neglect the Scriptural teaching on these points.¹² The minds of the unregenerate are set on the flesh (Rom 8:6). Their wills are enslaved to sin (John 8:34). The unregenerate are woefully incapable of saving themselves based on a decision or any kind of performance. In chapter nine, paragraph three, the confession states it this way: “Humanity, by falling to a state of sin, has completely lost all ability to choose any spiritual good that accompanies salvation. Thus, people in their natural state are absolutely opposed to spiritual good and dead in sin, so that they cannot convert themselves by their own strength or prepare themselves for conversion.”

It is no secret that Western Christianity has been pulverized by weak, watered-down approaches to evangelism, resulting in far more false converts than anything genuine. Such approaches either hide the true gospel under a bushel or they make it easy as possible to “make a decision.” Carnality is now rampant in the churches in an attempt to please such counterfeits. The blame must be cast upon a disbelief in the view that the confession takes, that “to be born again, brought to life or regenerated, those who are dead in trespasses also must have an effectual irresistible work of the Holy Spirit in every part of their souls to produce in them a new spiritual life.” This is why the importance of the Holy Spirit working through the gospel cannot be underestimated, which is what the last two sentences of the chapter alludes to.

The Holy Spirit and Prayer

Since no other means but the Holy Spirit working through the gospel “will bring about their conversion to God,” prayer cannot be overlooked when it comes to the gospel. Every gospel seed that is cast must be prayed over. Every field that is plowed with gospel preaching must be rained on with supplication. We must pray for souls in the prayer meetings. We must pray for souls at the supper table and in the closet. We must wrestle with God for souls as Jacob did in Genesis. Plead in the name of Christ for more souls to be saved. Plead with God to give the gift of faith to the lost. Preach and pray. Preach and pray. This is biblical evangelism. And yet, sadly, we all know how often the prayer meetings are neglected: “At a certain meeting of ministers and church officers, one after another doubted the value of prayer meetings; all confessed that they had a very small attendance, and several acknowledged without the slightest compunction that they had quite given them up.”¹³ How can we expect souls to be saved if we have no genuine passion to see it happen? Will Metzger agrees in *Tell the Truth*: “We should have a great expectancy in our prayers. God is willing and able to save a great number of people.”¹⁴ Also J.I. Packer reminds us to “pray for those whom we seek to win, that the Holy Spirit will open their hearts; and we should pray for ourselves in our own witness.”¹⁵ John Owen also notes the value of praying for the lost, saying about them, “Our duty is to pray that God would pour forth his Spirit even on them also, who will quickly cause them to ‘look on him whom they have pierced, and mourn.’”¹⁶

When we actually believe, like the confession does, that the gospel is abundantly sufficient for revealing Christ to the lost and that only the Holy Spirit can make our gospel call effective, we will also realize the impotence and even blasphemy of pragmatism and man-made measures. Even if our preaching sees little fruit, we have no business tampering with the God-given means of gospel proclamation and prayer when it comes to missions and evangelism. This is because the Holy Spirit working through the gospel will always prove effectual for those who are called. Consider Jesus’ great lesson on evangelism. He goes to the disciples after they had toiled all night for fish but caught nothing. They are tired and discouraged. He tells them to cast the net on the other side of the boat. Peter even says, “But we’ve fished all night and caught nothing” (Luke 5:5). Peter is implying, of course, that having seen no success previously, there won’t be any success the next time either. But despite the mild protest, off they go, throwing the net out on the other side. Nothing was different than last time. They didn’t try a new technique or consult their colleagues about latest fishing fads. They trusted in Jesus’ words to go try it again. They did not say to Jesus, “But you’re a carpenter, not a fisherman.” They knew who the Lord of the Harvest was. They trusted His sovereignty and they obeyed His orders. They were

blessed with a great catch. Who is to say it won't be the same for us the next time we go forth to evangelize? And even if it is not, we must remember that, "the gospel is the only outward means of revealing Christ and saving grace, and it is abundantly sufficient for that purpose." It is fitting that the chapter concludes with a reminder that the Holy Spirit working through the gospel is the only means that "will bring about their conversion to God."

Conclusion

Even though it is the will of God alone that determines where the gospel goes, He uses humans to transport it. What a privilege this is, considering that God was the first to communicate the gospel to man and we are imitating Him whenever we do the same. This is also why God burdens our heart about certain ministries or locations, since in His sovereign will and good pleasure, He is still seeing that the gospel goes to the lost in "varying degrees of expansion and contraction." The gospel we carry is the pearl of great price (Matt 13:45-46). It is the only hope man has of salvation and it must be proclaimed since "the light of nature" will never do the job. We can go forth in full assurance that God, through "the effectual, irresistible work of the Holy Spirit," will use the gospel to call forth His sheep and that, once gathered, He will never cast them out (John 6:37). This chapter is just as relevant in our own day as it was in the seventeenth century. For this reason, we can be thankful the authors of the Second London Baptist Confession decided to include it.

NOTES:

¹ See chapter ten, paragraph four of the Second LBC: "Those who are not elected will not and cannot truly come to Christ and therefore cannot be saved, because they are not effectually drawn by the Father."

² See The Christian Post article from October 10, 2018 entitled, "Witches Outnumber Presbyterians in the US; Wicca, Paganism, Growing 'Astronomically.'"

³ The SBC's North American Mission Board is a good example of this. They have strategically chosen large cities as their "focus areas."

⁴ See Michael A.G. Haykin's *The Missionary Fellowship of William Carey* (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2018).

⁵ William Carey to Mary Carey and Ann Hobson, December 22, 1796, in *The Journal and Selected Letters of William Carey*, ed. Terry G. Carter (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2000), 249.

⁶ Samuel E. Waldron, *1689 Baptist Confession of Faith: A Modern Exposition*, 3rd ed. (Webster, Ny.: Evangelical Press, 1999), 248.

⁷ John Owen, *The Work of The Spirit*, ed. William H. Goold (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust: 1967), 103.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ The author would agree with John MacArthur's definition of pragmatism: "The notion that meaning or worth is determined by practical consequences." *Ashamed of the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993), 26.

¹⁰ John Stott, "The Biblical Basis of Evangelism," Plenary Address at the First International Congress on World Evangelization in Lausanne, Switzerland, 1974. Retrieved from www.lausanne.org.

¹¹ Walter J. Chantry, *Today's Gospel: Authentic or Synthetic?* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1970), 86.

¹² For more elaboration, see Tom Ascol's *Traditional Theology & the SBC*, pp. 69-78 (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2018).

¹³ Charles H. Spurgeon, "Another Word Concerning the Down-Grade," *The Sword and the Trowel* (August 1887), 397-398.

¹⁴ Will Metzger, *Tell the Truth* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2012), 207.

¹⁵ J.I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1961), 119-120.

¹⁶ John Owen, *The Work of The Spirit*, ed. William H. Goold (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust: 1967), 103.

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John Frank Jones

Chapter 20: Of the Gospel, and of the Extent of the Grace Thereof

All the previous chapters of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith (hereafter BCF) reflected the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646). At chapter twenty, however, the Baptists inserted a completely distinct unit taken from the Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order (1656).¹

As the title stated, this chapter of the BCF addressed the Gospel, Gospel grace, and the extent of Gospel grace. From general to specific, the topics naturally lead to what is the chief element of the topics--the extent of Gospel grace.

“Extent” has the meaning of “the space or degree to which a thing extends; length, area, volume, or scope: ... something extended, as a space; a particular length, area, or volume; something having extension.”² The “extent” of Gospel grace addresses the idea of “How far does the Gospel reach?” or “To whom or where does the Gospel reach?” This chapter of the BCF addresses those questions.

Paragraph one summarizes the Gospel promise remedying the broken covenant of works. Paragraph two addresses the means by which the Gospel promise is generally revealed and the limitations of that revelation. Paragraph three speaks to God’s sovereignty in the general dispersion of the Gospel. Paragraph four further distinguishes the special revelation of the Gospel in Scripture from the particular application of the Gospel by the Holy Spirit.

This article addresses the first two of those paragraphs. The saving Gospel of grace is the only alternative to the broken covenant of works. Furthermore, this Gospel of grace is revealed only in God's Word. This article will progress through a quote of each paragraph, a commentary exposing principles from each paragraph, and conclude with some practical applications for contemporary believers.

WORKS OR GRACE?

Emboldened above all the schemes of the myriad religions addressing the question "How can one appease the God/gods?" are only two possible alternatives: WORKS or GRACE. Especially is it so in true religion. One must either earn, by his actions, God's pleasure, or God must, by His actions, satisfy Himself for the benefit of sinners.

The covenant of works and the covenant of grace are contrasted at various points in the London Confession. "Covenant of works" appears three times. Twice the term refers directly to the law and the third, here, is God's agreement relative to man's abstinence from the fruit of the tree.

"Covenant of grace" appears five times in the Confession. Every occurrence relates the covenant of grace to some aspect of salvation: conversion (7.2³); saving faith (14.2); repentance (15.2); preservation (15.5); or perseverance (17.2).

The signers of the 1689 Confession of Faith knew well the "Works-or-Grace" alternatives and purposefully championed the latter. Paragraph one of Chapter 20 clearly noted the alternatives.⁴

Commentary

The covenant of works bound Adam and Eve to only one simple restraint: don't eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That covenant stood or fell based upon Adam's works—his performance and obedience. Adam must perform; he must work. Furthermore, he must work for all his descendents—for all humans. The covenant included his working as the head of the race. His obedience or disobedience thereto affected not only his own person but the race of men as whose head he acted.

Adam broke that covenant when he ate of the forbidden tree. Other consequences attended breaking the covenant, but the Confessors referenced only the chief benefit thereof--life. The broken covenant became "unprofitable unto life." Once broken, the covenant of works could never again offer any possibility of its major benefit—life.

God's gracious and loving response to the broken covenant was to make a new covenant—the covenant “of promise.” The promise included several elements.

First, the promise **did not rest upon the required performance of man**. It requires no performance. It is reasonable to expect that a post-fallen man would be even less prone to fulfill a second works-based covenant than the pre-fallen man to fulfill the first works-based covenant.

Second, **the promise was Christ Himself**—a person who would fulfill same. The Confessors correctly interpreted the “seed of the woman” as “Christ.” One may easily see in the “Christ” title a reference to the deity of the promised One.

Third, the promise was **a human**—a kinsman--descended from the woman. Here may be seen the human nature of the promised deliverer--an able kinsman acting on behalf of an unable kinsman.

Four, the promise **targeted the elect**--a segment of sinners. While Genesis 3:15 does not specifically designate particular humans, it targets a particular person--Christ Himself and the particular persons as considered “in” Him.

Five, the promise **includes the means** by which God will effect its fulfillment. A “promise,” by virtue of its nature, is an obligation which fulfillment God takes upon Himself. Consequently, the promise must include all the means necessary to deliver same to its intended objects.

Six, the **means** of accomplishing the promise are included in the promise and **clearly identified**. A promise must be sure and certain to be fulfilled—i.e. effectual. (1) The promise will include a “calling.” A “caller” will communicate with a “called” in a manner actually and certainly effecting the intended purpose of the promise. (2) The promise includes a sure and certain “birthing”—i.e. regeneration—of its intended objects. (3) The promise includes a sure and certain repentance by its intended objects. (4) The promise includes a sure and certain faith from its intended objects.

Seven, the promise constitutes **the “substance” of the Gospel**. The Confessors recognized that revelation would progressively show further aspects of the Gospel. However, this promise in Genesis 3:15 contained the substance of the Gospel—an able descendent would correct that gone terribly wrong.

Eight, the promise is **effectual unto the ends designed**—the conversion and salvation of sinners. The success of the promise rests entirely upon the one who made same. This promise is not simply God saying “I’ve got an idea which would really be great if I could just somehow get it to work.” Nor is God saying “I really wish I could do something to correct this.” This plan is not simply drawn up and subject to modification along the way. It’s not just a good idea whose fulfillment is uncertain. It is not a possibility which might fail. It is not a plan which sometimes works.

It is a plan which every part or process from its initial design to its accomplished end includes every essential to its accomplishment. It’s a promise. It’s God giving His word. If He can’t do this, He must forfeit His title. Every sinner who has been foreknown, predestinated, called, and justified will be glorified (Rom. 8:29-30). The Gospel works every time, all the time, and for all time because it is the promise of a God who cannot lie.

Nor is this Gospel a scheme which requires any supplementation of human methodology. Its success does not depend upon any human ability, willingness, or actions, either within the sinner himself or human instruments or institutions. The success of this promise is not contingent upon the actions of any person other than God Himself. He personally guarantees its success and its certainty. The promise itself includes all the necessary methodology to effect same.

Nine, the promise is **a promise of grace**. Contrary to the performance required in the covenant of works, the promise is wholly of grace. Being in its nature “of grace,” it excludes works. Whatever human actions appear in the fulfillment of this promise, those actions themselves are included and guaranteed in the promise itself. Otherwise, the promise cannot be a “grace” promise.

Paul expressed the mutual exclusivity of grace and works: “And if by grace, then [is it] no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if [it be] of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work” (Rom 11:6). Grace contains no works; works contain no grace. God’s grace and human works do not mix in the scheme of this Gospel promise. If “not of works” (Eph. 2:10) means anything at all, it means that grace and its accompanying salvation are not of works.

Some Applications Relative to Works or Grace

I propose two applications to this brief consideration of works or grace. Both the applications are stated in the form of questions for the reader’s consideration. Space

limitations disallow answering the questions, but all of them demand a contemporary answering.

The first application speaks to **the works-or-grace principle in our preaching**. We make much, and we should, about preaching a Gospel of grace alone, without any mixture of works. How, though, can we successfully refute a charge of preaching a “salvation-by-works” message when we preach that a willingness to be saved, repentance toward God, and faith toward the Lord Jesus, or even the act of preaching itself, are acts which sinners or saints must “do” in order to be saved or to assist God in saving sinners? Where is the grace in making salvation contingent upon these acts?

The second application speaks to **the works-or-grace principle in our ministries**. We must be careful that we do not fall from a doctrine of grace into a confidence that the wisdom and talent with which we use legitimate means and devise others effects the work of salvation and the growth and upbuilding of the church. Though the pulpit ministry is primal, I’m thinking particularly about preaching, personal witnessing, disciple-making, planting, growing, maintaining, and/or revitalizing churches. I’m thinking about attendance, baptisms, and budgets. I’m thinking about our children/youth/family ministries, any of our multiple Bible study groups, and our varied “fellowship” actions.

How can we successfully refute a charge of a “ministry-by-works” system when we “tip our hats” to what God does in grace and quickly move to the main theme of the venue—“what you can do to make it happen.” We’ve a plethora of “how-to” experts, books, conferences, websites, blogs, sermons, statistical surveys, and studies on the topics of “evangelism,” “church growth,” “church planting,” and/or “church revitalization.”

These “how to” venues often follow the theme “This is how we did it (planted...grew...revitalized our church) and this is how you can do it.” Or the venue may say “These (4...5...6...9...20) factors characterize churches that are biblical...reaching young families...growing...being revitalized. Reproduce these characteristics in your church and you’ll have a New Testament, growing, thriving, restored-to-life church.” Where did we ever get the idea that theology can be so central while methodology matters little at all, that theology remains stable while methodology must change with every cultural shift?

Where is the venue which focuses upon the idea that “Just as the very best action you can perform will not make you right with God, so the very best action you can perform will not make your group of people into a Gospel church. But God, by His grace alone and in his role as Lord of the church, operates to effect His will in His churches.

How is a testimony of “I did this to produce a Gospel church” any different from a testimony of “I did this to be saved”?

20.2 GOSPEL REVELATION: GENERAL OR PARTICULAR?

How does sinful man learn about this promise of Christ in the Gospel? Paragraph two of Chapter 20 addressed the means by which the Gospel is revealed. Like paragraph one, paragraph two presented two alternatives. The two alternatives here are general revelation or special revelation.⁵

Commentary

Paragraph two of Chapter 20 distinguishes between general and special revelation relative to the Gospel. General revelation is God's showing His person and works to all people everywhere of all times. Special revelation, on the other hand, is God's showing particular aspects of his person and works to particular persons on particular occasions. Several specific principles may be seen in this paragraph.

First, **general revelation** includes God's created order and God's providential workings as enlightened by nature.

Second, **neither creation nor providence enable the discovery of Christ**. As wonderful and destructive as is creation, and while it regularly testifies to God's existence and power, calls its observers to worship and repentance, creation says nothing about Jesus or the Gospel. God's providence is seen in His sun shining on the good and the evil, His rain falling upon the unjust and the just (Matt. 5:45), and sets the times and boundaries of all the nations (Acts 17:26). As mysterious as those dealings of God with mankind are, they show neither Christ nor the Gospel.

Third, **man's natural reason does not enable the discovery of Christ**. If “nature” is used to denote the created order alone, the Confessors would be redundant in adding “the enlightenment of nature.” The best alternative would see the phrase as the rationality characterizing the pre-fall image of God contrasted with the disabled enlightenment remaining in the post-fall image. As wonderful as is man's mind, the discovery of Christ and His Gospel thereby lies in the nether regions of impossibility.

Sam Waldron suggested that the Confessors may reflected a Puritan-anticipated developing Deism.⁶ What appeared full-grown in Deism, however, was no more than the

standing error of the sufficiency of human ability to discover and experience salvific truth. Whatever the case, this paragraph certainly refutes the sufficiency of general revelation and natural theology, and asserts the necessity of special revelation in redemption.

Four, creation and providence enlightened by nature do not enable the discovery of Christ **even in a general or obscure way**. They cannot even make Christ and His Gospel a foggy apparition of possibility.

Five, creation nor providence provide sinners **no ability to saving faith or repentance**. The natural state of sinners include no abilities to attain either repentance or faith. The manifold acts of God's providence include no abilities to attain either repentance or faith. The Confessors clearly denied to fallen man the capability of Gospel repentance and Gospel faith.

Six, the revelation of Christ's Gospel in the Word of God **heightens the destitution of sinners**. How could sinners be "worse off" than their destitution of any knowledge toward repentance or faith in nature or providence? Their case can only be made more destitute by the revelation of Christ's Gospel in the Word of God. This is exactly what Jesus meant when he said to the self-righteous, truth-rejecting Pharisees "If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin: but now they have no cloke for their sin" (John 15:22).

Seven, said revelation essential to sinners' ability is provided **abundantly in the Word of God**. This is the Confessor's positive to the negatives of general revelation and providence. What they cannot reveal is revealed and revealed abundantly in God's Word.

Selected Application

Two paramount applications may follow this paragraph. First, our ministries must place **prominent emphasis upon the Word of God**. We must study, rightly divide, teach, preach, explain, quote, read (both publicly and privately), meditate upon, memorize, and publish Scripture. Since the Gospel of Christ is so essential in God's economy and is revealed *only* in God's Word, then all our ministries should be evaluated singularly upon whether or not those ministries are Bible-centered. If Scripture has final authority, our final authority for doing anything we do must come from Scripture.

Second, we must **place supreme confidence in the Word of God**. Is our greatest confidence in our homiletical skills, our oratorical skills, our rhetorical skills, our communication skills, our presentation skills, our lessons, our sermons, our evangelistic

presentation, our conference skills, our organization skills, our marketing skills, and/or our writing skills? Or does our confidence lie in God's Word, about which He said, "So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper [in the thing] whereto I sent it" (Isa. 55:11)?

NOTES:

¹ Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics, "20 Of the Gospel, and of the Extent of the Grace thereof" in "The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order 1658" (1996-2017), accessed January 17, 2018, http://www.reformed.org/documents/Savoy_Declaration/savoy2.html#twenty.

² "Extent" Dictionary.com. Dictionary.com Unabridged. Random House, Inc., accessed March 7, 2018, <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/extent>.

³ The method used herein to denote the chapters and paragraphs of the Confession text. "7.1" is "Chapter 7, paragraph 1).

⁴ Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics, "20. Of the Gospel and the Extent of Grace thereof," in "The Baptist Confession of Faith (1689) w. Scripture Proofs" (1996-2017), accessed January 17, 2018, http://www.reformed.org/documents/baptist_1689.html#Ch. 20. The text reads:

⁵ The covenant of works being broken by sin, and made unprofitable unto life, God was pleased to give forth the promise of Christ, the seed of the woman, as the means of calling the elect, and begetting in them faith and repentance; in this promise the gospel, as to the substance of it, was revealed, and [is] therein effectual for the conversion and salvation of sinners. (Genesis 3:15; Revelation 13:8).

⁶ Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics, "20. Of the Gospel and the Extent of Grace thereof," in "The Baptist Confession of Faith (1689) w. Scripture Proofs" (1996-2017), accessed January 17, 2018, http://www.reformed.org/documents/baptist_1689.html#Ch. 20. The paragraph reads:

⁷ This promise of Christ, and salvation by him, is revealed only by the Word of God; neither do the works of creation or providence, with the light of nature, make discovery of Christ, or of grace by him, so much as in a general or obscure way; much less that men destitute of the revelation of Him by the promise or gospel, should be enabled thereby to attain saving faith or repentance. (Romans 1:17; Romans 10:14,15,17; Proverbs 29:18; Isaiah 25:7; Isaiah 60:2, 3).

⁸ Sam E. Waldron. A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2013), 302-3. Waldron Sam E. A Modern Exposition of The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith. Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2013.

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Robert R. Gonzales Jr.

The Saving Design of God's Common Grace

Theologians frequently distinguish two species of divine grace in the Scriptures: *saving grace* and *common grace*. God directs the former particularly to the elect; God showers the latter indiscriminately on all men in general. Saving grace is, as its designation suggests, efficacious in effecting the redemption of those to whom it is given. Common grace, on the other hand, does not guarantee the salvation of its recipients. Nevertheless, God's common grace is saving in its design. That is, God sincerely intends the kindness and patience he shows to all sinners (whether elect or non-elect) to lead them unto saving repentance. The apostle Paul underscores this biblical truth in Romans 2:4.

Before we demonstrate our thesis concerning the teaching of Romans 2:4, we believe it would be helpful to read the verse in its larger context:

Therefore, you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. Do you suppose, O man--you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself--that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed (Rom 2:1-5, ESV).

From this passage (especially verse 4), we'll identify the recipients, the nature, and the design of God's common grace.

The Recipients of God's Common Grace

Precisely whom is Paul addressing in Romans 2:1-5?

The "Moralist" whether Jew or Gentile

The majority of commentators believe Paul has transitioned from indicting pagan Gentiles in Romans 1:18-32 to condemning self-righteous Jews in 2:1ff.¹ There are good reasons, however, to interpret the scope of Paul's indictment as inclusive of any moralist, whether Jew or Gentile.²

The Sinfully Self-Righteous Person

Not only is Paul addressing the self-confessed "moralist." He seems to have in view the person who not only prides himself in his assumed "superior" ethical mores, but also makes it his business to judge and condemn others less outwardly decent or religious. This is the kind of judgmentalism Jesus warned against in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 7:1-5). It's epitomized in the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican where the former, looking condescendingly on the latter, has the audacity to pray,

God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get (Luke 18:11-12, ESV).

The Blind and Stubborn Reprobate

Paul's characterization darkens as the passage progresses. This is not just a moralist who's got nothing better to do than to complain about the ills of the decadent society around him. Paul's diatribe is aimed at the man who *shows contempt*³ for the abundance of God's "kindness and forbearance and patience" of which he is a recipient. This contempt actually *blinds him*⁴ to the fact that such undeserved kindness has a benevolent design (2:4). And in this case, the blindness is the willful, sinful, and culpable variety.⁵ Worse, it results in a stubborn impenitence that accrues, rather ironically for the moralist, a "treasury"⁶ of divine wrath and judgment (2:5).⁷

The Nature of God's Common Grace

The “common grace” in this passage is God’s indiscriminate kindness shown to the undeserving or, better, ill-deserving. Paul describes this kindness using three nouns. The first, *χρηστότητος*, denotes the quality of beneficence. The second, *ἀνοχῆς*, signifies the quality of being forbearing or tolerant. It’s used in Romans 3:26 to refer to God’s postponement of judgment. The third, *μακροθυμίας*, refers to the quality of patience or long-suffering. Paul summarizes these ideas with the cognate adjective of the first noun, *χρηστός*, which is here used substantively— “God’s kindness.”

Some Grace Saves

Sometimes divine “kindness” is employed to signify a *discriminate, salvific, and efficacious grace*. For example, consider Paul’s words to the church of Ephesus:

But God, being rich in *mercy* (*ἐλέει*), because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ--by *grace* (*χάριτι*) you have been saved--and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his *grace* (*χάριτος*) in *kindness* (*χρηστότητι*) toward us in Christ Jesus. For by *grace* (*χάριτι*) you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God (2:4-8).

Worth noting is that Paul portrays God’s saving “kindness” (*χρηστότης*) as a species of “grace” (*χάρις*) and expression of “mercy” (*ἔλεος*). Moreover, we see a parallel in this text with Romans 2:4 in that both passages describe God’s kindness or grace in lavish terms: here, “God being *rich*” (*πλούσιος*); there, “the *riches* (*πλούτου*) of his kindness.”

Paul employs the same salvific kindness terminology in his letter to Titus:

But when the *goodness* (*χρηστότης*) and *loving kindness* (*φιλανθρωπία*) of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his *mercy* (*ἔλεος*), through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his *grace* (*χάριτι*), we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life (3:4-7).

In this case *χρηστότης* (“goodness”) and *φιλανθρωπία* (“loving-kindness”) function as the more general terms of which God’s saving *ἔλεος* (“mercy”) and *χάριτι* (“grace”) are species.

And, like our text (Rom 2:4) and Ephesians 2 above, this divine kindness is extravagant: “this Spirit he poured out on us *richly* (πλουσίως) through Jesus Christ our Savior.”

Some Grace Does Not

Some Christians seem to believe that “grace” vocabulary, like that above, always and necessarily denotes God’s efficacious and saving kindness to the ill-deserving. But this is simply not the case for several reasons.

First, the fact that the phrase “common grace” doesn’t occur in the Bible does *not* mean the concept behind the phrase is absent. To assume that the absence of a special term or a technical phrase precludes the idea or notion conveyed by such a word or phrase is to commit a linguistic fallacy. As James Barr explains, “It is the sentence (and of course the still larger literary complex such as the complete speech or poem) which is the linguistic bearer of the usual theological statement, and not the word (the lexical unit) or the morphological and syntactical connection.”⁸ For example, one will scour Genesis 3 in vain for such terms as “sin,” “evil,” “rebellion,” “transgression,” or “guilt.” But it’s obvious to most readers that the chapter is all about mankind’s fall into sin. Similarly, the Scriptures teach that God is one nature and three persons. Thus, we may affirm the doctrine of the “Trinity” even though the term doesn’t occur in the Bible. The same holds true for the phrase “common grace.”

Second, and related to the point above, it’s not the term “grace” by itself that denotes efficacious grace. Rather, the larger context in which the term occurs is what constrains the special (soteriological) signification. In general, the term “grace” denotes ideas like “favor,” “goodwill,” or “kindness.” Only when the term is employed in contexts where God’s regenerating, justifying, or sanctifying activity is in view does it convey the theological notion of divine saving grace to the ill-deserving. To assume that the English term or its Hebrew or Greek counterparts (see below) must always have a technical meaning in biblical discourse is, once again, linguistically fallacious. D. A. Carson calls this the *terminus technicus* fallacy in which “an interpreter falsely assumes that a word [e.g., “grace”] always has a certain technical meaning--a meaning derived either from a subset of the evidence or from the interpreter’s personal systematic theology.”⁹

Third, even the Hebrew and Greek terms commonly translated as “grace” (Hebrew: חֵן [noun], חָנַן [verb]/Greek: χάρις [noun]; χαρίζω [verb]) do not always denote God’s efficacious and saving kindness to the ill-deserving. When, for instance, Noah finds “grace (חֵן) in the eyes of the Lord” (Gen 6:8), he’s not receiving God’s saving grace as an ill-

deserving sinner, but God's approval as a righteous saint (see Gen 6:10). In other words, there is a species of grace that's actually merited (cf. Gen 33:12-17; Prov 12:2). Such is what the Gospel writer Luke had in view when he tells us, "Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor (χάριτι) with God and man" (Luke 2:52). Obviously, divine saving grace to the ill-deserving doesn't fit this context. There are many other examples of non-soteriological usage.¹⁰

Fourth, the biblical terms translated "grace" belong to a larger semantic domain that includes words such as "mercy," "compassion," "patience," "long-suffering," and "kindness." Such terms may denote God's discriminate saving grace, or they can signify a more general idea like God's indiscriminate kindness. Psalm 145 seems to bring both kinds of divine grace into close relation. The psalmist highlights God's covenantal or special grace in verse 8 with an allusion to Yahweh's self-revelation in Exodus 34: "The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." Then, in the next verse, he places God's special grace under the umbrella of God's common grace: "The LORD is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made."¹¹ The Greek term used to translate "all" in the LXX often signifies *the entire world* (Job 2:2; Isa 11:9; Nah 1:5), which nicely parallels the phrase "all that he has made." It seems then, there is a species of God's grace or kindness that is more general in scope.

Fifth, that the noun χρηστότης ("kindness") and adjective χρηστός ("kind") can denote a *non-salvific favor*, that is, a *general kindness*, is shown by the fact that they are predicated of Christians. That is, believers are commanded to be kind and gracious to others (2 Cor 6:6; Gal 5:22; Col 3:12; Eph 4:32). One should note that the species of "kindness" enjoined of humans in these passages is represented as analogous to the kindness God has showed toward us in salvation, not necessarily in terms of efficacy but in terms of its general nature, i.e., a kind of favor that is benevolent and merciful in character. Note how Jesus enjoins his disciples to imitate God's common kindness by being gracious even toward their enemies:

But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is *kind* (χρηστός) to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful (Luke 6:35-36, ESV).

Sixth, our text in Romans plainly refers to a species of divine grace or kindness that is not limited to the elect and that falls short of effecting the conversion of its recipients (see Rom 2:5). For this reason, we agree with William G. T. Shedd when he comments on Romans

2:4 and remarks, “The apostle is not speaking, here, of the effectual operation of special grace upon the human will, but only of common influences.”¹²

In summary, though the phrase “common grace” doesn’t appear in the Bible, the concept of common grace does. Common grace refers to God’s blessings on the human race that fall short of salvation from sin. Theologians usually classify these common expressions of divine kindness and benevolence as follows: (1) God’s restraint of human sin and its effects, (2) God’s bestowal of temporal blessings on humanity in general, and (3) God’s endowment of unbelievers with knowledge and skills to benefit human society as a whole.¹³ The goodwill, tolerance, and patience of Romans 2:4 would extend to all three of these dimensions of common grace. Yet these indiscriminate blessings are not an end in themselves. God has an agenda.

The Design of God’s Common Grace

Why is God so amazingly good, tolerant of, and patient toward the self-righteous and self-sufficient reprobate who spends his life condemning others and commending himself? Before we identify the obvious reason, which the apostle Paul highlights, let’s address two *incorrect* answers to the question.

To Assure the Sinner “All’s Well”

The first incorrect answer to the question is the one assumed by the impenitent moralist Paul is describing. Such a person interprets God’s gracious providence as a sure sign that God is pleased with him. The fact God hasn’t struck him dead with a bolt of lightning must mean God approves of him and that he has no need to fear. This kind of gross and groundless presumption characterized the Jewish nation who foolishly interpreted God’s deferral of judgment as a certain sign that all was well (see Jeremiah 7).

But Paul exposes the folly of this presumptuous attitude and in no uncertain terms declares quite the opposite. The self-righteous moralist is just as much under God’s condemnation as the depraved pagan. After all, all things are open before the eyes of whom we must give an account (Heb 4:13). Accordingly, the aim of God’s common grace has not been to stoke the moralist’s pride, to foster complacency, or to promote presumption. Rather, says Paul, God’s goodness is aimed at the self-righteous moralist’s repentance.

To Fatten the Sinner for Judgment

Some, especially those of the ultra-Calvinist bent, insist on reading the text as if God's design in demonstrating kindness to the non-elect were *nothing more* than a means to aggravate their guilt and increase their punishment. Just as the farmer feeds and fattens the turkey for the chopping block, so God showers good things upon and withholds immediate judgment from the self-righteous sinner to make him "ripe" for damnation. It's as if God's *only* intention toward the non-elect can be malevolent; any beneficence, on God's part, is disallowed. For example, in a critical review of John Murray's *The Free Offer of the Gospel*, Matthew Winzer asserts,

The reprobate are not considered merely as creatures when God dispenses his temporal benefits to them. They are "vessels of wrath fitted to destruction," and God is said to endure them "with much longsuffering" (Rom 9:22). And this longsuffering is not presented as being in any sense for their benefit, as if He were patiently waiting for them to turn to Him that He might be favourable to them. No, it is so that "he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory" (verse 23). Thus, God's wrathful enduring of the reprobate is for the purpose of mercifully manifesting His glory to the elect. Every temporal benefit, therefore, which comes to the reprobate is not without purpose, but is made effectual to them for their inuring [i.e., hardening] and making meet for damnation.¹⁴

In the same paper, Winzer concedes that God has a general love or benevolence for humanity in general, but he strongly insists that such benevolence cannot include any *disposition of goodwill* toward the non-elect.¹⁵ God can only be said to desire the damnation of those whose damnation he decrees.

Of course, it's true enough that God's indiscriminate common grace will aggravate the guilt and increase the punishment of the impenitent. That's the point of Romans 2:5. Moreover, God's damnation of the reprobate will also serve to highlight God's perfect justice and sovereign power while accentuating his mercy to the elect. That's the point of Romans 9:21-23. Nevertheless, the point of Romans 2:4 is quite another biblical truth.¹⁶

To Lead the Sinner to Repentance

Paul states the design of God's common grace in no uncertain terms. Addressing the self-righteous moralist who stubbornly persists in his impenitence, the apostle asserts,

“God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance” (Rom 2:4 ESV). Paul uses the present indicative, which literally reads, “... is leading you to repentance” (cf. KJV, NAS, NIV). Some wrongly interpret this as a simple statement of fact, *viz.*, God’s goodness [efficaciously] leads [a subgroup of sinful humanity, namely, the elect] to saving repentance.”¹⁷ But Paul’s use of the present indicative here has a *tendential* or *voluntative* force.¹⁸ Accordingly, the ESV correctly renders it “is *meant* to lead” (cf. NRSV, NJB). Other English versions convey the tendential or voluntative as “is *intended* to lead” (HSCB; cf. NLT) or “*would* lead” (NAB).

That the force of Paul’s language suggests a *beneficent disposition* on the part of God is further suggested by the likelihood that Paul is here echoing the language of the Wisdom of Solomon (*circa* 1st or 2nd century BC), an apocryphal book with which Paul would have been familiar. That book contains an indictment on the human race analogous to Paul’s discourse in Romans 1:18-32. What’s more, the author of Wisdom of Solomon highlights God’s merciful design behind his patience and longsuffering toward sinners:

But you are merciful to all (ἐλεεῖς δὲ πάντα) for you can do all things, and you overlook people’s sins, so that they may repent (παρορᾷς ἀμαρτήματα ἀνθρώπων εἰς μετάνοιαν) (Wisdom 11:23, NRSV).

A little later he writes,

Though you were not unable to give the ungodly into the hands of the righteous in battle, or to destroy them at one blow by dread wild animals or your stern word. But judging them little by little *you gave them an opportunity to repent (ἐδίδους τόπον μετανοίας)*, though you were not unaware that their origin was evil and their wickedness inborn, and that their way of thinking would never change (Wisdom 12:9-10, NRSV).

Paul’s thought here finds some analogy in his discourse to the Greek philosophers at the Areopagus:

And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, *that they should seek God (ζητεῖν τὸν θεόν)*, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us (Acts 17:26-27 ESV).

It's probable the apostle Peter had Paul's teaching in Romans 2:4 in view when Peter wrote in his Second Epistle:

Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. *And count the patience of our Lord as salvation* (καὶ τὴν τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν μακροθυμίαν σωτηρίαν ἡγεῖσθε), just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him (2 Pet 3:14-15 ESV).

Finally, we would suggest that this Pauline and Petrine notion of a *saving design* underlying God's benevolence and patience is what a pseudonymous writer in the fourth century plainly commends in the so-called Apostolic Constitutions (AD 375-380) when he writes,

Great art thou, Lord Almighty, and great is thy power; and to thine understanding there is no limit; our Creator and Saviour, rich in benefits, long-suffering, and the Bestower of mercy, who dost not take away thy salvation from thy creatures; for thou art good by nature, and sparest sinners, and *invitest them to repentance* (Greek: εἰς μετανοίαν προσκαλούμενος [summon] / Latin: *eos ad penitential provocans*); for admonition is the effect of thy bowels of compassion. For how should we abide if we were required to come to judgment immediately, when, after so much long-suffering, we hardly emerge from our miserable condition!¹⁹

In summary, then, from the evidence above we may conclude a saving design in the indiscriminate common grace God showers on all men whether elect or non-elect.

Conclusion

The larger implication of Romans 2:4 is the fact that we cannot limit God's desire for human compliance with the terms of the law and the gospel to the elect alone. Yet we fear that a strain of "High-Calvinism" does this very thing. Constrained by a "substance metaphysics" assumption that one cannot predicate non-actualized potency of God, i.e., unfulfilled wishes or desires,²⁰ these theologians make every effort to avoid the force of such texts as Romans 2:4. Thus, John Gill admits that "the providential goodness of God has a tendency to lead persons to repentance." However, Gill is shackled to the unbiblical notion that God can only desire what he decrees. Since God evidently did not decree the salvation of the person(s) envisioned in this text, Gill must find a way to "reinterpret" it to fit his system:

This is to be understood not of a spiritual and evangelical repentance, which is a free grace gift, and which none but the Spirit of God can lead, or bring persons to; but of a natural and legal repentance, which lies in an external sorrow for sin, and in an outward cessation from it, and reformation of life and manners, which the goodness of God to the Jews should have led them to.²¹

But if *the repentance* (μετάνοιάν) of verse four is the “natural and legal” kind, why does Paul insist that those who’ve been led to such non-saving repentance will be judged as the Last Day because of the *lack of repentance* (ἀμετανόητον) in verse 5? Same Greek term with alpha privative! Closer to the truth is John Calvin when he concludes, “The design of [God’s] benevolence is ... to convert sinners to himself.”²² Indeed, it is Calvin’s moderate and chaste form of “Calvinism” that better reflects the apostle’s thinking. God’s common grace cannot effect repentance in the sinner’s heart apart from his saving grace. Nevertheless, God’s common grace does serve to reveal God’s salvific posture toward fallen humanity, including those who ultimately resist his overtures of good will.

NOTES:

¹ See, for example, Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on Romans* (1835; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1983), 46-47; C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans 1--8*, ICC (London: T & T Clark, 2001), 136-39; John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols. NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 1:54-56; Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 107-08; Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 126-27; Thomas Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 105-07, among others.

² The arguments for an inclusive reading include the following: (1) Romans 1:16 speaks of Jews and Greeks; no indication of a narrowing of scope to Gentiles in 1:18; (2) Romans 1:18-32 not just directed to Gentiles--verse 23 alludes to Ps 16:20 and Jer 2:11, which are indictments against Jews; (3) Romans 2:1 begins with a logical connector, “therefore,” and suggests a continuation of the argument. “O Man” and “Everyone who” are general terms that apply to all men. Note also that “passing judgment” is something Gentiles are said to do in 2:15; (4) both Jews and Gentiles are addressed in 2:1-16; (5) the occurrence of anthropos in 1:18 and 2:16 may serve to bracket the whole pericope; (6) Romans 2:17 provides a clear transitional marker for shift from mankind in general to the Jews in particular: “But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God” These arguments are drawn from Samuel Waldron’s lecture notes for “Prolegomena I: Introduction to Systematic Theology and Apologetics” (Unpublished, n.d.), 108-09. Commentators who read the passage as inclusive include John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, in vol. 8 of *Calvin’s Commentaries*, trans. Ross Mackenzie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 40-44; R. C. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg Press, 1945), 128-30; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, TNTC (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1963), 86-89.

³ The Greek term καταφρονεῖς frequently refers to disrespect or contempt for authority. See 1 Tim 4:12; 6:2; Titus 2:15; 2 Pet 2:10.

⁴ “Failing to understand” (ἀγνοῶν) stands in apposition to “showing contempt” (καταφρονεῖς).

⁵ In some cases, “not knowing” doesn’t imply any fault or moral culpability. See Rom 1:13; 1 Cor 12:1; 1 Thess 4:13. In other cases, however, such blindness is morally culpable. See Rom 10:3; 1 Cor 14:38; 2 Pet 2:12). We agree with W. G. T. Shedd who interprets the ignorance in Romans 2:4 as belonging to the second category: “The word implies an action of the will along with that of the understanding. It is that culpable ignorance which results: 1. from not reflecting upon the truth; and 2. from an aversion to the repentance which the truth is fitted to produce. It is the ‘willing ignorance’ spoken of in 2 Pet. iii.5.” *Commentary on Romans* (1879; repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967), 37.

⁶ Thomas Schreiner doesn’t miss the irony: “The word θησαυρίζεις (*thesaurizeis*, you are storing up, v. 5) is probably ironical, for it typically denotes the future bliss Jews would have because of their good works (Tob 4:9-10; 2 Esdr [4 Ezra] 6:5; 7:77; 8:33, 36; 2 Bar 14:12).” *Romans*, 109.

⁷ Herman Hoeksema tries to interpret the 2nd person singular pronoun σε (“you”) as generic for humanity in general, thus allowing that some of whom Paul addresses here (the elect) come to repentance (2:4) while others (the reprobate) do not and are condemned (2:5). See his *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1966), 119. Of course, the “Man” (ἄνθρωπε) whom Paul here addresses (2:1, 3) is generic. But, as argued above, Paul’s focus is more narrow than humanity in general. Moreover, the σε (“you”) in verse 4 is the same “you” in verse 5 as the 2nd person singular pronoun σου (“your”) and reflexive σεαυτῷ (“yourself”) demonstrate. We suspect that Hoeksema’s dogmatics are driving his exegesis, rather than the other way around. See K. W. Stebbins’ critique of Hoeksema’s exegesis in *Christ Freely Offered* (Strathpine North, Australia: Covenant Press, 1978), 72-73.

⁸ *Semantics of Biblical Language* (1961; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 263.

⁹ *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 45-46.

¹⁰ Sometimes humans show “grace” or withhold it (Gen 33:10; 39:4; 50:4; Exod 3:21; Ruth 2:2, 10; 1 Sam 20:3, 29; Eph 4:29; Deut 24:1; Luke 6:32-34; Acts 20:27; 25:29; 2 Cor 8:7, 9). Sometimes “grace” is used for “adornment” (Prov 3:22; 4:9; Prov 17:8) or something like “graceful,” “charming” or “fitting” (Prov 5:19; 7:5; Prov 10:32).

¹¹ The parallelism of verse 8 and 9 make God’s “grace” synonymous with his “goodness.”

¹² *Commentary on Romans*, 37.

¹³ For fuller treatments, see Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 432-46; John Murray, “Common Grace,” in vol. 2 of *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 93-119; Anthony Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 187-202; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 657-668.

¹⁴ “Murray on the Free Offer: A Review by Matthew Winzer” (2000): http://www.dr-bacon.net/blue_banner_articles/murray-free-offer-review.htm (accessed Nov 20, 2018).

¹⁵ We rather agree with John Murray when he remarks, “It is a metallic conception of God’s forbearance and longsuffering that isolates them from the kindness of disposition and of benefaction which the goodness of God implies.” *The Epistle to the Romans*, 59.

¹⁶ Robert Haldane is on target in his commentary on Romans 2:4: “From this it evidently follows that God externally calls many to whom He has no purpose to give the grace of conversion. It also follows that it cannot be said that when God thus externally calls persons on whom it is not His purpose to bestow grace, His object is only to render them inexcusable. For if that were the case, the Apostle would not have spoken of the riches of His goodness, and forbearance, and long-suffering,--terms which would not be applicable, if, by such a call, it was intended merely to render men inexcusable.” *The Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: William Oliphant and Co., 1874), 78-79.

¹⁷ For instance, in Hoeksema’s opinion “the text states a fact: the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance, εἰς μετάνοιάν σε ἄγει.” Then he argues that Paul is addressing humanity in general. Finally, Hoeksema opines, “It makes no difference whether the apostle has in mind the Jew or Jews and Gentiles both. Of this ‘man’ it may, indeed, be said that God’s goodness actually leads him to repentance, as is clearly evident in the case of the elect. Yet, it may also be said of man that he despises the goodness of God, and does not know by actual experience that it leads him to repentance as, again, is evident in the case of the reprobate that rejects the gospel. and thus aggravates his condemnation.” *Reformed Dogmatics*, 119. Once again, we think Hoeksema’s dogmatics skew his exegesis.

¹⁸ More fully, the present indicative as *gnomic* (affirming a general truth) and *voluntative* or *tendential* (expressing intention without reference to the outcome). Douglas Moo refers to it as conative, which conveys a similar modal sense. *The Epistle to the Romans*, 133, n. 42; cf. Cranfield, *Romans I*, 145; C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of the New Testament* (Cambridge, 1953), 8; Henry Alford, *The New Testament for English Readers* (Chicago: Moody Press, n.d.), 856; Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator’s Handbook on Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1973), 33-34. Grammarians who discuss this use of the indicative include Dana and Mantey, *A Manual Grammar* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1956), 186; and Daniel Wallace, *Beyond Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 534-35, 752).

¹⁹ Clement, Bishop and Citizen Of Rome (Pseudonym) *The Work Claiming To Be The Constitutions Of The Holy Apostles, Including The Canons*; William Whiston’s Version, Revised From The Greek (Irah Chase, Otto Krabbe, D. Appleton and company, 1848), Book 7, 35.1, [p. 150]. <http://ldsfocuschrist2.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/apostolic-constitutions-william-whiston.pdf> (accessed Nov 20, 2018).

²⁰ The argument seems to go something like this: God’s essence is identical with his will and God’s will is delimited by God’s decree. To predicate unfulfilled desires of God is to affirm parts of God that are non-actualized potencies. In a word, it is to deny that God is “pure act” (*actus purus*) and to affirm that he is composed of both actualized desires and also non-actualized desires. For a philosophical defense of this notion, see James E. Dolezal, *God Without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God’s Absoluteness* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 34-44, 177-87, 188-91, 194-97. No doubt, there is much truth

to the concept of God as pure act. Yet here is a case where extended inferences from “natural theology” bump up against the clear testimony of Scripture. When that happens, so much the worse for natural theology.

²¹ *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 2 volumes (London: William Hill Collingridge, 1852; reprint, Atlanta, GA: Turner Lassetter, 1954), 2:10.

²² *Calvin's Commentaries*, trans. John King; Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847), Accordance electronic edition. Cf. Shedd, *Commentary on Romans*, 37; Hodge, *A Commentary on Romans*, 48-49; Thomas Chalmers, *Lectures on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (New York: Robert Carter, 1845), 39; Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 59-60; Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 133; Cranfield, *Romans 1--8*, 145.

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Sam Waldron

J. V. Fesko's *Reforming Apologetics—Retrieving the Classical Reformed Approach to Defending the Faith—A Critical Review*

Preface

Let us be frank. Fesko's *Reforming Apologetics* is challenging for Presuppositionalists. I have been a convinced Presuppositionalist in my understanding of the defense of the faith for something over 40 years. Of course, this commitment has not been without remaining questions. Who can read Cornelius Van Til and not have questions? Who can think about Presuppositional apologetics and not ponder some very deep and difficult issues?

Part of the reason for my problem is my own education. Though I have read a good deal of philosophy over the years, I never quite finished a philosophy minor in college. A knowledge of philosophy is, as Fesko's book itself makes clear, really helpful in discussing biblical apologetics with its unavoidable focus on epistemology. Fesko admits that Thomas Aquinas was influenced by the Aristotelian philosophy in his day. He argues that a Kantian and Idealist philosophical background was important in the formulation of Van Til's apologetic approach.

Still, I have been convinced that Van Til's approach embodied a commitment to the distinctives of the Reformed faith lacking in other systems. More importantly, I have found its key insights in Scripture. I am a Presuppositionalist because of my understanding of Scripture and not because of my understanding of philosophy. I found in Van Til key advances in embodying scriptural truth in Christian apologetics.

All that being said, Presuppositionalism has fallen, it seems to me, on dark days. For perhaps 50 years Presuppositionalism has been, if not the reigning system of apologetics in Reformed circles, a very popular viewpoint. Of course, there was push back at times. 30 years or so ago I read *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics* authored by R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1984). I found its argument unconvincing and (some of) its theology problematic. I think it did little to stem the rising tide of Presuppositionalism.

It appears, however, in our day that a re-evaluation of Presuppositionalism has gained momentum. I suspect that one influence might be "reverence" for R. C. Sproul. Sproul is one of the major influences in "the Reformed resurgence." His passing into glory may have given his well-known opposition to Presuppositionalism a new appeal for some.

Another cause of this re-evaluation may be that every theological system is subject to a kind of degeneration—especially when it enjoys the kind of popularity that Presuppositionalism has gained in Reformed circles. This can be illustrated from Van Til's idea of paradox. Paradox is important in Van Til's approach. Cf. John Frame's Essay, *Van Til: The Theologians*. (It is available online at <https://frame-poythress.org/van-til-the-theologian/>). I certainly agree with him about the importance of this concept. There has been, it appears to me, misuse or at least sloppy use of the important concept of paradox prominent in Van Til's approach. Presuppositionalists have occasionally said things that are not only paradoxical, but downright irrational. The adversaries of Van Til have also trumpeted some of his (and his followers) more novel-sounding theological statements.

An additional cause of re-evaluation is that Presuppositionalism has additionally been co-opted by viewpoints that must be suspect by those who follow the Reformed Confessions. One is Theonomy. Christian Reconstructionism has proudly proclaimed that one of its foundational tenets is Presuppositionalism.¹ I am convinced that the Theonomy of Rousas Rushdoony and Gary North cannot be squared with the Reformed Confessional tradition. Statements critical of both Calvin and the Westminster Confession by them actually admit this. To a lesser extent even Greg Bahnsen, whose views of Van Til's apologetics

I respect, also contradicts at points the Reformed tradition. My views of these men and their theonomy are set out in an essay entitled: *Theonomy [or Christian Reconstruction]: A Reformed Baptist Assessment*. It is available online. Suffice to say, many if not most Presuppositionalists are traditionally confessional and have actually rejected Theonomy in the sense taught by its classic exponents.

Another cause of re-evaluation is the embrace of viewpoints which possibly deviate from the tenets of Classical Theism by some Presuppositionalists. Leading Presuppositionalists like Scott Oliphint in books defending Presuppositional apologetics have adopted viewpoints that appear to raise questions about the simplicity and impassibility of God. Cf. K. Scott Oliphint, *Covenantal Apologetics: Principles and Practice in Defense of Our Faith*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

For all of these reasons, not a few in our day are ready to re-evaluate Presuppositionalism's claim to be the truly Reformed apologetic. This is, of course, neither fair nor logical. Neither Theonomy, nor revisionist views of classical theism, follow from Van Til or Presuppositionalism. Nevertheless, suspicion remains in some minds. Thus, if there is not a crisis, there are at least major questions regarding Presuppositionalism and its claims. As a confessional Reformed Baptist, these things make it more difficult to respond to Fesko's challenge to Presuppositionalism.

Introduction

But this somewhat personal preface to the appearance of Fesko's book provides no clear idea of the nature of Fesko's volume and its argument. To understand *where Fesko is coming from* involves an understanding of some important currents which have arisen in Reformed scholarship in recent years.

One of those currents has been the growing appreciation for the accomplishments of what is known as the high Reformed Scholasticism of the late 16th and 17th centuries. This current is deeply reflected in the subtitle of Fesko's work: *Retrieving the Classical Reformed Approach to Defending the Faith*. The *Classical Reformed Approach* of which Fesko speaks is a reference to the high Reformed Scholasticism just mentioned.

To understand the story of the emergence of this renewed appreciation for Reformed Scholasticism, one must go back to and provide a brief introduction to a theory popular

in previous generations of historians. The theory is known as *Calvin versus the Calvinists*.² Fesko mentions this theory explicitly and takes issue with it in many places. (48, 50, 52, 53, 56, 67-69) This theory over the years was elaborated in many ways. Here is a chart which suggests its character and claims.

CALVIN and THE CALVINISTS

	Calvin	Calvinists
General Character:		
Methodology:	Biblical Humanism	Systematic Aristotelianism
Ethics:	Positive and Constructive	Polemic and Defensive
Tone:	Modest and Moderate	Speculative and Extreme
Specific Doctrines		
Scripture:	Dynamic, Proto-Barthian or ?	Wooden, Literalistic View
Predestination:	Non-speculative, Moderate	Supralapsarian, Extreme
Atonement:	Universal Atonement or ?	Limited Atonement
Original Sin:	Mediate Imputation or ?	Immediate Imputation
Justification:	Doubtful as to Double Imputation	Explicit Double Imputation
Church Gov't:	Broad, Non-dogmatic	Dogmatic Presbyterianism
Assurance:	Christocentric-Objective	Pietistic-Subjective
Faith:	Assurance of the Essence	Assurance not of the Essence
Law & Sabbath:	Evangelical, Non-Sabbatarian	Legalistic, Sabbatarian
Civil Gov't:	No Divinely Mandated Form	One Divinely Mandated Form
Revolution:	Conservative, Anti-revolutionary	Radical, Revolutionary

A key issue that informs Fesko's critique of Van Til and Presuppositionalism has to do with this claim that Calvin differed from his theological descendants in rejecting the scholastic tradition informed by the philosophical methodology of Aristotle. Reformed historians under the influence of especially the work of Richard Muller have raised serious questions about this view of Calvin. Muller in his *Unaccommodated Calvin*³ and *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*⁴ has argued that this distinction is not only exaggerated but probably false.

This is important with regard to Van Til and Presuppositionalism because of two well-known claims of Van Til. The first is that Calvin significantly and even drastically differed from the Medieval Scholastics in his approach to apologetics and especially natural theology. The second is that later Reformed theologians drifted from Calvin into a view of apologetics that actually returned to the views of Medieval Scholasticism.

The view associated with Muller and other contemporary historical theologians is that to understand Calvin properly, he must be situated within the classical, Christian theological tradition and not contrasted with it. This means that, far from being contrasted, for instance, with Thomas Aquinas and the Medieval theological tradition, he must be interpreted as working within it. Similarly, this means that far from contrasting him with his Calvinist theological successors he must be interpreted in harmony with them. Thomas Aquinas, the Medieval theologians, Calvin, and the “Reformed Scholastics” of the succeeding generation are all seen as utilizing the same scholastic methodology. Muller argues in *Unaccommodated Calvin* that, though this scholastic method is not as apparent in Calvin, it informs many of his writings.

Flowing from this thesis is another and even more important consequence. There is much more commonality in Calvin’s actual theological system and affirmations with the Reformed and especially the Medieval “Scholastics” than has generally been recognized.

This is a startling claim and not just for Presuppositionalists. Central to Van Til’s claims regarding Presuppositionalism is a contrast especially with Medieval Scholasticism’s approach to apologetics. The notion that Calvin had much more in common with Thomas Aquinas than has been generally recognized is both challenging and serious to Presuppositionalism.

What shall we make of this new paradigm of contemporary Reformed historians? How should we respond to it and the challenge it poses for Presuppositionalism’s claims? Though I am in general carried by Muller’s thesis, I also believe that it is easily subject to overstatement and abuse.

I am carried by it in so far as it is clear that many of the contrasts between Calvin and the later Calvinists have been based on significant misunderstandings of or imbalanced, one-sided treatments of Calvin. Into this category, for instance, must be placed Brian Armstrong’s not too subtle attempt to present Calvin as the father of Amyraldianism.⁵ Into the same category must be placed R. T. Kendall’s horrendous attempt to appropriate Calvin to universal atonement and his intellectualist view of faith.⁶ I am not familiar with any attempts to appropriate Calvin for passibilist or semi-passibilist views of God, but it is clear to me that Calvin held to classical views of the doctrine of God as propounded by both Medieval and Protestant Scholastic theologians. This is an important point for those arguing for a more “scholastic” Calvin.

At the same time, a warning must be stated. The current scholarly trend towards a scholastic Calvin must not be pressed to the point where certain differences between Calvin and some of his Reformed successors are denied. It is clear that there are differences between Calvin and the Reformed on a number of the subjects noted in the chart above. It seems to me that Calvin did define saving faith in terms which made assurance of salvation essential to saving faith. It seems clear to me that his views of the Christian Sabbath are neither as consistent nor complete as though of his Puritan successors. The degree of difference between Calvin and the Calvinists on these issues has been overstated. Seriously wrong practical conclusions have been drawn from these differences. Nevertheless, differences clearly do exist. On both of these issues I prefer the views of the confessional tradition found in the Westminster and 1689 Baptist Confession to those of Calvin. While at many points the confessional tradition closely reflects (and sometimes almost verbatim) the views of Calvin, there are distinctions between Calvin and the Calvinists that cannot be denied.

There are also places where I agree with Calvin against his Reformed successors. It is well-known that a revolutionary, political tradition developed among Calvin's Presbyterian successors. It is really clear that Calvin is not the author of this tradition and in fact would have rejected this development. I have documented the reasons for this assertion in my essay on *Political Revolution in the Reformed Tradition: An Historical and Biblical Critique*. Suffice to say here, Calvin makes his anti-revolutionary view clear in the *Institutes* (4:20), in his commentaries on the key passages, and in his letters to the French Reformed movement.

In the prevailing enthusiasm for Muller's thesis, these distinctions must not be forgotten. Muller himself in *Unaccommodated Calvin* refuses to claim Calvin for a full-blown doctrine of limited atonement.⁸ William Cunningham (1805-1861) cannot be accused of being influenced by 20th century historiography. Yet he cautions against wrongly flattening the difference between Calvin and his successors. He has this to say about Calvin and the Calvinists:

And it has often been alleged that Beza, in his very able discussions of this subject, carried his views upon some points farther than Calvin himself did, so that he has been described as being *Calvino Calvinior*. We are not prepared to deny altogether the truth of this allegation; but we are persuaded that there is less ground for it than is sometimes supposed, and that the points of alleged difference between them in matters of doctrine, respect chiefly topics on which Calvin was not led to give any

very formal or explicit deliverance, because they were not at the time subjects of discussion, or indeed ever present to his thoughts.

Though some may think that John Murray was too influenced by the historiography of his day, he provides this analysis of the issue.

It would be unhistorical and theologically unscientific to overlook or discount the developments in the formulation of Reformed doctrine that a century of thought and particularly of controversy produced. Study even of Calvin's later works, including his definitive edition of the *Institutes* (1559), readily discloses that his polemics and formulations were not oriented to the exigencies of debates that were subsequent to the time of his writing. It is appropriate and necessary, therefore, that in dealing with Calvin, Dort, and Westminster we should be alert to the differing situations existing in the respective dates and to the ways in which thought and language were affected by diverse contexts. This is particularly necessary in the case of Calvin. Too frequently he is enlisted in support of positions that diverge from those of his successors in the Reformed tradition. It is true that Calvin's method differs considerably from that of the classic Reformed systematizers of the seventeenth century. But this difference of method does not of itself afford any warrant for a construction of Calvin that places him in sharp contrast with the more analytically developed formulations of Reformed theology in the century that followed.¹⁰

A definitive evaluation of Fesko's claims based on Muller's historiography must await the following review of his volume. These cautionary thoughts are intended simply to set the stage for that evaluation.

Overview

Reforming Apologetics consists of an introduction and eight chapters. The introduction provides a survey of the book with the intention of summarizing its argument.

The first three chapters have for their purpose the rehabilitation of natural theology. Fesko argues in Chapter 1 which is entitled, "The Light of Nature," that natural theology has played a vital role in high Reformed theology or Reformed Scholasticism. Utilizing Burgess's lectures on the light of nature (24), he rebuts scholarly views of a previous generation that Reformed theology was opposed to natural theology and argues that the

Reformed were one with the “common catholic heritage” found in Aquinas and Augustine which affirmed natural theology (25-26).

In Chapter 2 Fesko discusses the idea of common notions. Once more from Anthony Burgess’s lectures on the law he shows that “common notions” were a part of the theology of the Puritans. He proceeds to argue that “common notions” were taught by the Greek philosophers and were “the proximate source” of the concept in high Reformed theology. (32) Once more Fesko concludes that Reformed theology held a form of natural theology. (48)

In Chapter 3 Fesko specifically addresses “Calvin.” That is the title of the chapter. Calvin’s views must be discussed because Calvin is frequently seen as the opponent of natural theology. Fesko associates Van Til with Barth’s famous rejection of natural theology. (51-52) This leads Fesko to reiterate some of Richard Muller’s work showing that Calvin utilized a scholastic methodology, though not so overtly as some later Reformed theologians. He is careful to distinguish between the use of this methodology and “specific doctrinal outcomes.” (54) Nevertheless, Fesko argues that the traditional arguments for the existence of God are implicit in Calvin’s writing. (63-65) Thus, he once more concludes that Calvin held and taught a form of natural theology in continuity with the catholic tradition. (68-69)

In Chapters 4-7 Fesko turns to several specific issues raised by his claim that natural theology is part and parcel of the Reformed tradition beginning with Calvin himself.

Chapter 4 is simply entitled, “Thomas Aquinas.” Fesko’s treatment of Van Til and Aquinas is strangely both blunt and nuanced. Early in the chapter with reference to Van Til’s critique of Aquinas—a critique that is basic to his apologetic project— Fesko asserts: “Is Van Til’s critique accurate? The short answer is no.” (72) Specifically, with reference to Aquinas’ five proofs for the existence of God, Fesko argues that Van Til has wrongly characterized Thomas as rationalistic. (75-80) Obviously, this is an important point to which we must return in the evaluation of Fesko’s arguments. But at this point Fesko attempts to explain why Van Til has misread Thomas. Fesko’s interesting explanation for this is threefold. “There are three chief reasons: (1) reading Thomas in the light of postmedieval developments, particularly a post-enlightenment reading; (2) trying to divide Aquinas the philosopher from Aquinas the theologian; and (3) failing, ultimately, to examine clearly the primary sources.” (81) These are serious criticisms of Van Til. Fesko, however, attempts to soften the blow for his Van Tillian readers. He avers: “Just because Van Til misread Aquinas does not mean that we must embrace everything that Thomas

said. Conversely, it does not mean that everything that Van Til said on these matters is categorically wrong. Rather, the truth lies somewhere in the middle.” (93) In another place he remarks: “Although he erroneously evaluated Aquinas’s views, this does not invalidate all of Van Til’s insights about the problematic nature of autonomous reason.” (95) In spite of these concessions, Presuppositionalists are treated with this hair-raising assessment in the very last sentences of this chapter: “Aquinas and other theologians of the Middle Ages and patristic period belong equally to Protestants. They have insights to offer, and we have much to learn from them regarding theology and, perhaps especially, apologetics.” (96)

In Chapter 5 which is simply entitled, “Worldview,” Fesko provides us one of the more unique subjects and viewpoints in his book. Startlingly, he argues that the emphasis of James Orr, Abraham Kuyper, and Cornelius Van Til on the idea that one’s worldview controls how one thinks about everything is mistaken. It is, he affirms, a mistaken viewpoint owing to the adoption of Idealist perspectives. This contradicts, according to Fesko, the idea of “common notions” for which he has been at such pains to defend in his earlier chapters. Here we see an attempt (typical of Westminster West) to resist the claims of some Presuppositionalists, especially those of a Theonomic bent, to make the Scriptures speak to everything in the world. With Van Drunen and others Fesko is interested in reserving a place for natural law and showing that the Scriptures are intended to have a limited range of authority to matters of religion and Christian duty. One of the more controversial claims of Fesko in this chapter is that Moses is dependent in his exposition of the civil law of Israel either on the Code of Hammurabi or on material that predates that code. (121-122) I find myself deeply ambivalent about Fesko’s view in this interesting chapter. Once more it needs discussion in the evaluative section of this review.

Chapter 6 treats “Transcendental Arguments.” Once more Fesko seeks to bring Van Til and Apologetics back to the touchstone of natural theology as taught by the Reformed Scholastics. He begins by citing Turretin who affirms a natural theology partly innate and derived from common notions and partly acquired by being drawn from the book of nature by discursive reasoning. (135-136) This is one of the more difficult chapters in Fesko’s book because of the fairly constant necessity of qualifying his critique of Van Til. He cannot say that the transcendental argument is wrong. He acknowledges it to be a useful tool. (137) He cannot quite say that Van Til rejected the use of evidence. He must limit this claim to “some Van Tillians” and suggest that it follows from certain statements of Van Til. (137) Perhaps the most important and consistent claim of this chapter is that the transcendental argument is not the Copernican Revolution in apologetics which both Van Til and Van Tillians have claimed. (136)

The pivotal paragraph in this chapter deserves quoting and reads as follows:

This chapter deals with three issues, namely whether (1) Van Til engages in synthetic thinking; (2) some overemphasize the coherence theory of truth at the expense of the correspondence theory; and (3) the TAG is wedded to outdated philosophical trends. Van Til accused Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) of employing synthetic thinking, combining pagan and Christian thought in order to defend the faith. But although Van Til rejected Aquinas's methodology, in truth his own TAG is similar. Both Aquinas and Van Til employed the dominant philosophies of their day in order to build an intellectual bridge to unbelievers; Aquinas and Van Til spoke with Aristotelian and Kantian accents, respectively. (137-138)

This is a challenging chapter for Presuppositionalists. It exposes tensions on issues like the use of evidence and the claims made for the TAG between Van Tillians (140-141); between Knudsen and Van Til; (144) and between Van Til's two main interpreters Frame and Bahnsen. (136-137) The exposure of such divergences is serious for Presuppositionalism. It certainly raises interesting and important issues that require resolution. At the same time the penetrating power of this chapter's critique is limited by the fact that on these issues Presuppositionalism is a moving target. Or perhaps it would be better to say that it presents several different targets!

Chapter 7, "Dualisms," is of less interest to this reviewer. The reason is, as Fesko himself says, "This chapter ... primarily interacts with the claims of Herman Dooyeweerd." (8) The link here with Van Til and mainstream Presuppositionalism is tenuous. Still Fesko seeks to make the connection through the association of Van Til with Dutch Neo-Calvinism (161-164). At any rate, this chapter is of less significance to me because Dooyeweerd and his philosophy is only distantly related to Van Til, difficult to the point of incomprehensibility, and criticized by Cornelius Van Til himself.

Fesko reaches the conclusion of his volume in Chapter 8, "The Book of Nature and Apologetics." Reading this chapter was an unusual experience. I began the chapter saying "yes, yes, and yes." (195-206) I closed my reading of it by saying "no, no, and no." (206-219) How and why did my response change so drastically? I think the reason is that in the first part of the chapter Fesko simply expounds the nature and the contours of a biblical and covenantal epistemology, but in the second he critiques Presuppositionalism.

The exposition of what Fesko calls "starting point, the necessary commitments for a biblical apologetic methodology" and "the nature of epistemology ... within the framework

of classic covenant theology: the covenants of redemption, works, and grace” and “the two goals of a covenant epistemology, namely, love and eschatology” is one of the best parts of the book. (194) I worried a little about how closely Fesko related the covenant to creation. I believe there is an important and confessional distinction between creation and the covenant. Cf. the Westminster Confession of Faith chapter 7, paragraph 1. The covenant was technically an addition to creation, but I can live with Fesko’s statement of this because teleologically creation was for the covenant and intended as the theatre of special revelation (as Calvin avers).

Fesko began to lose and frustrate me when he began to critique Van Til and Presuppositionalism on the basis of this epistemology. Once more I felt that there was a drastic misunderstanding of Presuppositionalism in play here. Fesko clearly has Presuppositionalism and Van Til in mind when he says, “Apologetically, this means that believers can present the gospel in conjunction with rational arguments and evidence and know that believers can intellectually receive and comprehend the message.” (212) Whoever thought otherwise? Certainly not Van Til who teaches that unbelievers “get it” very well!

The most depraved of men cannot wholly escape the voice of God. Their greatest wickedness is meaningless except upon the assumption that they have sinned against the authority of God. Thoughts and deeds of utmost perversity are themselves revelational, that is, in their very abnormality. The natural man accuses or else excuses himself only because his own utterly depraved consciousness continues to point back to the original natural state of affairs. The prodigal son can never forget the father’s voice. It is the albatross forever about his neck.¹¹

But on this point this review must now turn to an evaluation of Fesko’s important book.

Evaluation

Commendation

There is certainly much that is challenging in Fesko’s work. There is certainly much to be learned. Furthermore, given the directions Reformed historiography has taken in recent years, it seems to me that a book like this *had* to be written. Let me commend a number of things in it.

First, as I have just said, his summary of what a biblical and covenantal epistemology looks

like was well done. Presuppositionalist that I am, I still find it a very helpful summary of the scriptural approach to how we know.

Second, I much appreciated his account of the purposes of apologetics. Here is what he says:

Apologetics, narrowly construed as a rational defense of Christianity, does not convert fallen sinners. ... I argue that apologetics has a threefold purpose: (1) to refute intellectual objections to the Christian faith, (2) to clarify our understanding of the truth, and (3) to encourage and edify believers in their faith. (203-04)

I think Fesko here helpfully articulates the fact that apologetics (narrowly construed) has a negative and kind of secondary purpose. It does not and ought not to pretend to create arguments for the existence of God which positively ground the believer's faith. Without pretending to understand all that was in Fesko's mind when he wrote this, it does suggest to me a number of important features of the apologetic endeavor. First, apologetics is properly defensive. It is an apologia or defense of the faith. It is not, then, properly (or narrowly) speaking a positive attempt to argue discursively for the existence of God or the truth of Christianity. It assumes the faith and defends the faith so assumed against attack. Second, this suggests to me, secondly, that the much disputed arguments for the existence of God appear quite differently depending (1) on whether they are construed as the positive ground or origin of the Christian's faith in God or (2) whether they are construed as defenses of a faith already assumed. I think that Bavinck and others have seen something of this distinction when they have argued that these arguments are *confirmations of or testimonies to* the existence of God rather than proofs.¹² As testimonies and properly constructed, the traditional "proofs" may have a certain defensive value toward unbelievers and confirming value for believers. Third, it seems to me that we may want to distinguish in our discussions of the existence of God between apologetics more broadly considered as epistemology (how we know that God exists) and more narrowly considered as apologetics (how we defend our faith in the existence of God to unbelievers).

Thirdly by way of commendation, it must be said that Fesko's book exhibits many, fine scholarly qualities. It manifests widely read scholarship. It shows that he attempts to fairly represent those with whom he differs. Though complicating his argument, Fesko still nuances his views and especially his assessment of Van Til. (108, 137, 141, 144)

Fourth, I thought his account of faith seeking understanding was well said. In particular,

I appreciated his statement to the effect that “trusting authority lies at the root of all epistemology.” (195)

Critiques

First, from the beginning of his book till its end Fesko consistently fails to understand the distinction between natural revelation and natural theology in Presuppositionalism. There is no more crucial distinction than this for Presuppositionalism in my opinion. When Van Til rejects natural theology, he is not rejecting or giving up on the book of nature. With regard to the book of nature or natural revelation, Van Til never tires of saying that believers and unbelievers have *everything in common*. The student should re-read Van Til's essay entitled, “Nature and Scripture,” in *The Infallible Word* cited previously and his many other assertions to this effect.¹³ It simply is not true that Van Til denies the commonality between unbelievers and unbelievers with regard to common notions and the like. This is, however, what Fesko assumes everywhere. (4, 9, 12, 26, 48, 65, 68-69, 99, 100, 109, 110, 111, 114, 125, 126, 135-36, 146-147, 149, 194, 212, 219) Only if common notions are made to consist in a natural theology created by depraved men, would Van Til oppose such common notions. This critique cannot be pursued without mentioning a second difficulty.

Secondly, then, Fesko fails to weigh properly the apologetic effects of Thomas' sub-biblical view of sin. (34, 72, 75, 78, 80, 84, 85, 94, 104) This is important because it is exactly this factor which distinguishes Van Til's assessment of natural revelation from his assessment of natural theology. Natural revelation is the divine given of human existence which at a basic level of awareness all men cannot escape. Natural theology is the human interpretation of natural revelation. Because Van Til holds with Reformed theology that men are totally depraved and that this depravity affects their mind and reason radically, he cannot allow that a natural theology can be any kind of preamble to faith. By definition such a natural theology is an interpretive endeavor pursued by men who are totally depraved. Thus, it cannot be successful. Rather, depraved human reason must and will inevitably corrupt the meaning of natural revelation in any natural theology it creates. Such a natural theology cannot serve in any sense as a preamble to faith.

Let me mention here that my own reading has convinced me that the categories and terminologies with which Reformed Scholasticism discussed natural theology were inadequate. They were inadequate precisely because they did not clearly distinguish

between natural revelation and natural theology. Sometimes natural theology is used by Reformed scholastics to mean natural revelation. Van Til's apologetics pressed a distinction between these two things that is, in my view, massively important.

This brings up a third criticism. Unless Fesko is willing to say that Thomas Aquinas has a fully biblical and Reformed view of sin, and he does not seem to say to this, he cannot expect Reformed Christians to find in Aquinas a model for apologetic endeavor. Yet, clearly, Fesko offers Aquinas as a model for Christian apologetics. (96) The whole hinge of the distinction between a true natural revelation and a proper natural theology resides in one's doctrine of sin. If Thomas Aquinas's doctrine of sin was inadequate, then his view of natural theology cannot be correct.

Fourth, Fesko probably depreciates Calvin's critique of scholasticism. (52, 53, 68, 69) It seems to me that a statistical study of Calvin's Institutes will show that Calvin frequently cites Augustine with enthusiasm, but rarely cites Aquinas positively or at all.¹⁴ Furthermore, his references to scholastic theology are mostly critical. One does not have to disagree with Muller's thesis of a scholastic method in Calvin to argue that Calvin consistently rejected their doctrinal conclusions. (53) It remains to be seen, in my view, what Calvin's view of Aquinas's theology might have been. I am not convinced that Calvin's statements about the existence of God which are characterized as *rhetorical* by Muller (64) are the same in character as Thomas's five proofs for the existence of God.

Fifth, Fesko engages repeatedly in the common, evidentialist misunderstanding of key texts of Scripture and Calvin which assert the knowledge of God. He sees in these statement warrants for arguments for God rather than statements of the fact that men know God without discursive arguments. (62, 63, 64, 77, 89, 90) The fact is that Romans 1:18-23 does not teach that men may come to know God or that men may argue for the existence of God from natural reason. This passage and similar ones teach rather that men *actually do know God from natural revelation* without the complicated and lengthy arguments of Anselm or Aquinas. We have heard evidentialist and post-Enlightenment classically oriented apologists make this mistake too often to overlook it when Fesko makes precisely the same mistake.

Sixth, Fesko's argument for Christians not claiming comprehensive knowledge of everything on the basis of the Bible is imbalanced. Of course, the Reformed confessional tradition makes clear that the sufficiency of Scripture is not its omni-sufficiency for every science. Cf. the Westminster and 1689 at 1:6. What Fesko fails to see, however, in his polemic against Idealism and Worldview theory is that what the Bible does teach

sufficiently is basic and foundational for every other area of study. Fesko does not clearly state that, while Christians do not claim that the Bible is sufficient for all knowledge, they do believe that it is basic or foundational to all knowledge and that nothing is properly understood unless understood theistically. While unbelievers have a functional or working knowledge of some things, they have a proper theological knowledge of nothing. (67, 98, 99, 104, 127, 129, 209, 215, 216, 217) Sometimes Fesko seems to notice this. He makes clear, for instance, that Scripture truth claims do create givens for the science of human origins and universal origins. (216) It does this, however, because scriptural knowledge, while not sufficient for non-religious and non-theological sciences, is foundational for them. How can what we believe about God *not* be basic for all human knowledge? Yet, Fesko can say that the covenantal exile in which they live does not mean that “everything they do is wrong.” (210) We know what he means, but surely what he says is not all the truth. In another sense and in the most important sense, everything they do is wrong. Their covenant exile does affect everything they do. Surely if any generation of Americans should see this, we should. Our culture is falling apart. In the midst of the cultural disaster all around us—with its devastating effects on everything and even on something so basic as gender identity—shall our message be to unbelievers that *not everything you do is wrong*. They are wrong basically and foundationally about God, and this does affect everything. But with his concern to counter the triumphalism of some Christians and their excessive claims, Fesko denies the antithesis between Christianity and other worldviews and the devastating effects of this antithesis culturally and educationally. (120, 123, 130, 133, 194, 210, 211, 215)

Conclusion

We are glad for the emphasis of Fesko and others that there is a generally agreed upon classical theism that resides in the scholastic tradition of the church. We agree that 21st century Christians do not get to re-define the Christian God. The Reformation itself, however, shows that the scholastic tradition could deviate into bypaths. It also shows that one must account for positive doctrinal development in the church. For myself, and I suspect others, I am not ready to return to the natural theology of Aquinas. I find in Calvin, in the Reformed tradition, and Van Til's Presuppositionalism a progress of doctrine which improves upon the natural theology of Thomism.

NOTES:

¹ Peter J. Leithart, "An Interview with Dr. R. J. Rushdoony," *The Counsel of Chalcedon* (Sept. 1985): 14-17; Gary North, *Honest Reporting as Heresy: My Response to Christianity Today* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1987), 7.

² Two important statements of this historical paradigm are these: Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy: Protestant Scholasticism and Humanism in Seventeenth Century France* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969.); *John Calvin: A Collection of Essays*, ed. by G. E. Duffield, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1968). In this collection see especially Basil Hall's "Calvin against the Calvinists," 25f.

³ Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin* (Oxford: New York, 2000).

⁴ Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003).

⁵ Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*.

⁶ R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.)

⁷ This essay was my thesis for my ThM written for Grand Rapids Baptist Theological Seminary. It is currently unpublished.

⁸ Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, 6.

⁹ William Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation*, pp. 349, 350.

¹⁰ *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*, ed. by Peter Y. Dejong, "Calvin, Dort, and Westminster - A Comparative Study," John Murray, pp. 150, 151.

¹¹ *The Infallible Word* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978) Cornelius Van Til, "Nature and Scripture," 274-75.

¹² John Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 740; Herman Bavinck, ed. John Bolt, trans. Jon Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics First*(Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 2:90, 91.

¹³ *The Infallible Word: a Symposium*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978), "Nature and Scripture," 263-301. Cf. the tract by Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and Witness-bearing* (Lewis J. Grotenhuis, Belvedere Road, Phillipsburg, NJ), 8f. Cf. his *The Defense of Christianity and My Credo* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, n.d.), 11: "Natural revelation is perfectly clear. Men ought through it to see all other things as dependent on God. But only one who looks at nature through the mirror of Scripture *does* understand natural revelation for what it is. Furthermore, no one can see Scripture for what it is unless he is given the ability to do so by the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit." Cf. also page

24 of the same tract where Van Til approvingly cites Calvin and says: “Calvin makes a sharp distinction between the revelation of God to man and man’s response to that revelation. This implies the rejection of a natural theology such as Aquinas taught.” He goes on to distinguish the responses to God’s revelation by (1) man in his original condition, (2) mankind, whose “understanding is subjected to blindness and the heart to depravity” (3) those that are “taught of Christ” through Scripture and whose eyes have been opened by the Holy Spirit.” In Van Til’s syllabus entitled, “An Introduction to Systematic Theology,” reprinted in 1966 pages 75-109 emphasize the importance of general or natural revelation. Cf. also Greg Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1998), 177-194. In these pages Bahnsen documents Van Til’s commitment to “the inescapable knowledge of God in nature” and the distinction between natural revelation and natural theology.

¹⁴ I did a count of Book 1 of the *Institutes* (McNeil-Battles edition) [John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* ed. By John T McNeill; trans. by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, MCMLX) to confirm for myself the evidence. Here are the results of my own count. Calvin never mentions by name Thomas Aquinas. There is one possible and positive reference to his writings that I found (210). Calvin mentions Plato one time positively (46). He mentions Aristotle by name 4 times once neutrally (82) and three times negatively (56, 194, 194). Calvin, on the other hand, mentions Augustine by name and always positively 25 times (5, 76, 77, 77, 78, 92, 105, 106, 106, 110, 113, 126, 126, 127, 143, 144, 144, 144, 158, 207, 207, 208, 213, 234, 237) and there is an additional possible reference to Augustine but not by name (217). Augustine is massively the most cited church father in Book 1. I think this continues throughout Books 2-4. I would say that these statistics present an obstacle for the idea of a Thomistic Calvin.

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