

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

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1 Historical Context

This chapter is a little different from others for a few reasons. First, if you've attended a Reformed church for any length of time, you can probably guess the matter of each chapter in the confession just from its title. But when we (or I at least) see this title we might think, 'Is this about limited atonement?' Not quite. Second, there's really nothing in this chapter that wasn't already covered, at least by implication. Third, you won't find this chapter in the Westminster Confession. It was added by the congregationalists in the Savoy Declaration.

The Savoy directly addresses this new chapter in its introduction saying,

After the 19th cap. of the Law, we have added a cap. of the Gospel, it being a Title that may not well be omitted in a Confession of Faith: In which Chapter, what is dispersed and by intimation in the Assemblies' Confession with some little addition, is here brought together, and more fully under one head¹.

In other words, "you can't have a chapter on the Law, and then not have a chapter on the Gospel." But, as we read this chapter, we'll find that it seems to be arguing against some prevailing notions concerning special revelation, rather than simply explaining the Gospel. Everything is cast in the context of how we know the Gospel.

What is special revelation?

Is there another kind of revelation? What's general revelation?

Article II of the Belgic confession deals with how we know God. It says,

We know Him by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as a

¹Cited from Renihan. Location 8,128

most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to see clearly the invisible things of God, even his everlasting power and divinity, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 1:20. All which things are sufficient to convince men and leave them without excuse².

That's general revelation: how we know we're responsible to someone, and guilty.

Second, He makes Himself more clearly and fully known to us by His holy and divine Word, that is to say, as far as is necessary for us to know in this life, to His glory and our salvation³.

That's special revelation: how we know what to do about our condition. And it seems like this is the idea being defended in this chapter.

Earlier, in the introduction of the Savoy, it says "[a] few things we have added for obviating some erroneous opinions, that have been more broadly and boldly here of late maintained by the asserters, than in former times. . ." So they're taking the opportunity to address some things that weren't noisy enough to warrant the attention of the Westminster Assembly 12 years before. *We* don't need a new confession; ours still makes plenty of contact against error. And the mere fact of it being about 380 years old makes it more valuable. But if we *were* writing one now, we'd probably find ourselves adding a chapter or two: there are a few new erroneous opinions to obviate in our day; things they didn't think they needed to be explicit about in the 1640s. As we've discussed in earlier chapters, creeds and confession usually aren't written just for fun, but in order to assert, and defend the truth in clear, unequivocal language over against error.

If I were to summarize this chapter way too briefly, I'd say that it asserts the necessity of knowing Christ by special revelation for salvation, and God's freedom to reveal selectively. We could say the key idea of this whole chapter is 'revelation'. So what could possibly be going on that would necessitate a defense of this idea? Deism, and the Enlightenment—I call it the Endarkenment—wasn't going to catch on for another hundred years or so. Waldron suggests that maybe the precursors to Deism were already making some noise.

Renihan is a great help here. He points out that all the big-shots at the colleges, and other prominent places, were still Christian—not deists. There

²<https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/belgic-confession>

³*Ibid.*

were hints of rationalism around, but not that much argumentation going on against supernatural revelation. The folks our fathers were contending with tended to be Arminian, or Socinian, if they weren't Roman Catholic. If you read much John Owen, you'll quite often find him clashing with these guys in particular, and he was likely the primary drafter of this very chapter.

I'm not sure we've mentioned Socinians before. Does anyone know what Socinianism is? Their roots are in what's called the Radical Reformation; where you'll find the continental anabaptists, and other wild-eyed crazies. Among other things, they rejected the doctrine of the Trinity; they held unbiblical views on human nature (anthropology); they denied the atonement was propitiatory (in favor of the idea of "moral example"); with regard to predestination, they held to something like *open theism*, or *process theology*. Unlike deists, they had no problem accepting the existence of miracles. And their problem wasn't the *existence* of supernatural revelation, but the *necessity* of it.

In Renihan's view, there are a few factors contributing to a sense that this chapter was necessary.

First, Renihan explains that,

Both Arminians and Socinians *broadened* the way of salvation to include those who had no explicit faith in Jesus Christ but who lived up to the precepts of their own cultures. These must be the groups whose presence provoked the necessity of the new confessional statement⁴.

But doesn't it go without saying that we need to know Christ? Isn't this kind of obvious? I mean, this is a *Christian* confession, right? Do we have to answer *every* idea that comes around? Well, it wasn't just the usual suspects. To show that this "broadening" of the way of salvation was making inroads among the orthodox, I'll quote *Richard Baxter's Catholick Theologie*:

Those ... that teach the Church, that it is a certain truth, that no one in the world (Infant or Aged) is saved from Hell Fire, but Christians only, and that this is not only certain to such great understandings as their own, but must be so to all true Christians, do but discover that they over-value their own understandings, and that siding hath contracted their thoughts and charity into a sinful narrowness, and that the Opinions of men, counted Orthodox, prevaieth more with them than the

⁴Renihan. *Baptist Symbolics, Volume 2*. (Locations 8155-8157). Kindle Edition.

evidence of truth, and I think that they are to be numbered with those that by over-doing, do dangerously undermine the Christian Faith⁵.

If you don't know Richard Baxter, he's one of our heroes of the Puritan days. He wrote *The Reformed Pastor*, which is standard reading for Reformed folks like us. This is kinda like hearing J.I. Packer advocating theistic evolution, one of maybe John Piper's bad takes. I do think it might be possible to take that quote above in a more charitable way, but at a "pastors' fraternal⁶" in the mid-1600's he also "expressed strong disagreement with any statement that placed salvation in dependence on Scripture alone⁷." And he did this in front of John Owen.

So it wasn't just wing-nuts who were being carried away by the idea that special revelation might not be necessary for salvation. A bonus chapter *is* justified. This kind of thing shouldn't be news to us. Galatians 2 contains this episode where Peter (an apostle!) was in error. And Barnabas was carried away with him. None of use should be so proud as to be sure wouldn't be right there along with Barnabas. So Baxter's great books can still be great, but we must always be discerning.

One other factor contributing to the necessity of this chapter is ecclesiological. The Congregationalists in the American colonies "had come under strong criticism for their lack of outreach to the native inhabitants⁸." Thomas Lechford had spent three years in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, then returned to England and wrote a book called *Plain-Dealing*. In it he criticized the congregational form of church polity, saying that

because all Churches among them are equall, and all officers equall, and so between many, nothing is done that way. They must all therefore equally beare the blame; for indeed I humbly conceive that by their principles, no Nation can or could ever be converted⁹.

Later he explains that, "the 'conversion and subduing a Nation' cannot take place without 'Royal Assistance' and this necessitates Episcopalian church government and polity¹⁰."

⁵Cited from Renihan. Locations 8163-8169.

⁶Renihan says this happened at "1654 meeting of prominent minister-theologians in London (chaired by John Owen)." John Owen was involved in the creation of the Savoy. (The Savoy was formulated in 1658, and the 2LBC in 1677).

⁷Renihan. Locations 8160-8161.

⁸Renihan. Location 8174.

⁹Cited from Renihan. Locations 8182-8184.

¹⁰Renihan. Locations 8186-8187.

So the Independents had to address this. Renihan says,

On the one hand, it was essential to articulate clearly a doctrine that would reject all Arminian and Socinian inroads, and on the other hand, to explain the spread of the gospel in terms of divine sovereignty rather than ecclesiology¹¹.

2 The inauguration of this revelation (§ 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;(1) in this promise the gospel, as to the substance of it, was revealed, and [is] therein effectual for the conversion and salvation of sinners.(2)

- Confession Passages
 - 1. Ge 3:15.
 - 2. Rev 13:[4-]8.
- Waldron passages
 - **Galations 4:4** (Son of God, born of woman under the law)
 - **Ge 3:15. with Ephesians 2:12** (gentiles were strangers to the covenants of promise)
 - **Hebrews 11:13** (heroes of the faith greeted the promises from afar)
 - **Luke 2:25, 38** (Simeon “waiting for the consolation...”), 23:51 (Joseph of Arimathea “looking for the kingdom”)
 - **Romans 4:13-16** (the promise of heritage to Abraham came by faith, not through the Law)
 - **Galations 3:15-22** (seed, not seeds)

2.1 The framework in which it was inaugurated

We already learned in the Chapter on the Fall (6) that we can’t be saved by the Covenant of Works. Even if you could swear to perfectly conform to

¹¹Renihan. Locations 8200-8201.

it, it's too late. You've already broken it. There's no starting over. Even if there were starting over, we were party to the covenant of works *through Adam*, our federal head, who broke it on our behalf. So we were in violation of it the day we were conceived.

Renihan points out an important difference between the Savoy and the 1689 where it says “God was pleased to give forth the promise of Christ.” The Savoy has “God was pleased to give unto the elect” instead. Renihan says,

The Savoy statement might be interpreted narrowly— i.e., to infer that the gospel is only intended to be presented to the elect— while the Baptist adjustment indicates a commitment to gospel preaching in consonance with [chapter 7, ¶2]: It pleased the Lord to make a covenant of grace wherein he freely offereth unto sinners, life and salvation by Jesus Christ. The parallel language in these two chapters must not be missed. The gospel is freely offered to sinners, and the elect are called in result. From its first appearance in the 1640s, an aggressive plan of gospel preaching and church planting characterized the Particular Baptists¹².

2.2 The form in which it was inaugurated

Since there's no redo on the Covenant of Works, God must do something, or we die. Our confession here says the Law is “unprofitable to life.” This is what Paul is talking about in Romans 8:3 “For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do.” (ESV) That is, the law can't save, because it depends on the flesh despite its fallen condition. But what God has done to resolve this impossible situation began right away. This phrase “seed of the woman” in our paragraph is a reference to Genesis 3:15:

I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel.”

The first “promise of Christ” was given to the serpent. This moment is what theologians call the protoevangelion, which means literally first good message, or first Gospel.

You might think this first expression of the Gospel is pretty obscure and vague. Just hope in this “seed”? Is that all it takes? What about all this

¹²Renihan. Locations 8251-8256.

doctrine? We've got 32 chapters in this confession. When Christ preached the gospel, what did he preach? Something like, "the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye and believe the gospel." (Mark 1:15) Or, if we go to the second or third centuries, we'll find baptismal vows that say something like, "I renounce thee, Satan, with all thy pomp"¹³. Even the Apostles' Creed, and the Nicene Creed pass over important details. The point is it's a matter of faithfulness or loyalty to Christ. It's not *what* we trust, but *whom*. We trust Christ, and we're loyal to his kingdom before we start to worry about how atonement technically works. For fifteen centuries before the Reformation, the doctrine of justification by faith alone wasn't explicitly formulated in clear confessional form as we have it. Don't get me wrong; this doctrine isn't a novelty, or an innovation. You're playing will hellfire if you deny it—to deny is to turn *from* the grace of Christ. Justification by faith alone is sitting right on the surface of the text: you don't have to dig deep, or engage in any Romish subtlety to see it. I'd even say it's more plain even than the Trinity. But the meat of the Gospel is Christ himself crucified, raised, and enthroned as King.

2.3 The function for which it was inaugurated

Our confession goes on to say that this seed of the woman is the means of calling the elect, begetting them in faith and repentance. That is, we are *born* a second time in faith and repentance. Now faith needs an object. If you have faith, there's something in particular you have faith *in*—something you're faithful *to*, or loyal *to*; something you trust *in*. And, if you repent *from* something, you must repent *to* something. This means that, for salvation, we need to know the object of our faith. And so, as early as Genesis 3:15, the substance of the promise of the Gospel was revealed. This revealed promise of the Gospel, our confession says, is effectual for the conversion and salvation of sinners.

We can be sure this "seed of the woman" is Christ, in part because of Galatians 3:15: "Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ." The promise of the seed is something that can be traced from Adam, to Noah, to Abraham, to Jacob, to David, *etc.* You can see Old Testament saints prophesying, hoping for, watching for the promised seed. You can see Satan and his sons despising, opposing, and attempting

¹³Cited from Schaff. *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Vol. IX: *Petri - Reuchlin*. Entry: RENUNCIATION OF THE DEVIL IN THE BAPTISMAL RITE. <https://ccel.org/s/schaff/encyc/encyc09/htm/iv.vii.clxiii.htm>

to corrupt and pollute the promised seed.

2.4 The fullness with which it was inaugurated

We never hear of anything other than hope in Christ being effectual for the conversion and salvation of sinners. And it's not revealed by nature alone; it's not revealed by nature at all. There's no way we could know it without a message of it coming to us somehow. We'll also see in paragraph 4 that even the gospel as information alone wouldn't awaken us without the work of the Holy Spirit.

God is judge, and he can allow folks into his presence however he likes, but the Scriptures give us no other rock than Christ. James 3:1 says "My brethren, be not many masters [teachers], knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation." So the rightly honored Richard Baxter is really sticking his neck out when he teaches that anyone other than Christians can be saved. We are only free to teach that "there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." (Ac 4:12)

3 The necessity of this revelation (§ 2)

This promise of Christ, and salvation by Him, is revealed only by the Word of God;(3) 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;(4) 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.(5)

- Confession Passages

- 3. Ro 1:17 (righteousness of God is revealed...).
- 4. Ro 10:14-15,17.
- 5. Pr 29:18 (where there is no prophetic vision...); Isa 25:7 (a veil); 60:2-3 (a light).

- Waldron Passages

- Acts 4:12 (no other name); Romans 10:13-15 (everyone who calls... will be saved)
- Psalm 19 (heavens declare the glory); Romans 1:18-23 (no excuse)

- Romans 2:12a (all perish, knowing the law or not); Matthew 28:18-20 (make disciples); Luke 24:46-47 with Acts 17:29-30 (detailed propositional content that cannot be discovered from nature); Romans 3:9-20 (we’re accountable for what we know from nature; even *more* accountable if we have the law)

3.1 The affirmation of its necessity

The second clause in our paragraph here says that the works of creation and providence, with the light of nature do not reveal Christ in any way; not even sorta vaguely. Nature does reveal God’s existence, glory, and personhood. We saw in the last chapter that the law is written on our hearts. Our hearts have been corrupted by the fall, but they’re sufficient to tell us we’re sinners. There’s enough still there to tell us that we’re on the wrong side of justice.

But when we get to the idea of any promise of Christ, or any hope salvation... well “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?” (Ro 10:14.)

3.2 The implications of its necessity

This means there simply is no salvation other than a revelation from God himself.

Matthew 11:25:

²⁵ At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. ²⁶ Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight. ²⁷ All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him.

Here we begin to see that God, in his sovereignty, not only reveals, but he may even leave people in darkness.

Sam Waldron summarizes the implications of this paragraph like this:

Men will be lost even if they never hear the gospel. Men must hear the gospel to even have the possibility of being saved. Men do not deserve a chance to be saved. God is just and yet gives many men no opportunity to be saved. Men have enough divine revelation to be without excuse, but not enough to be saved.

Men are not damned, therefore, only or merely for not believing in Christ. Some who have never committed the sin of rejecting the gospel will go to hell for sin¹⁴.

4 The sovereignty of this revelation (§ 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;(6) 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;(7) and therefore in all ages, the preaching of the gospel has been granted unto persons and nations, as to the extent or straitening of it, in great variety, according to the counsel of the will of God.

- Confession passages
 - 6. Ps 147:[19-]20 (the oracles belong to the Nation of Israel); Ac 16:7 (Holy Spirit didn't allow them to go to Bithynia).
 - 7. Ro 1:18-32. (a disappointing display of “men's natural abilities”)
- Waldron passages
 - Matthew 11:20[-27] (the Son reveals)
 - Romans 3:10-12 (none are righteous); 8:7, 8 (enmity of flesh and spirit)

4.1 The assertion of this sovereignty

So, as our confession has it: “in all ages the preaching of the gospel” is granted to people and nations in great variety—according to the counsel and will of God alone. In other words, “The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.” (Jn 3:8)

¹⁴Waldron. p. 296

4.2 The implication of this sovereignty

Our confession *completely* dispenses with the idea that the Lord's sovereign mercy could be dependent on the object of this mercy here. It talks about the "due improvement of men's natural abilities, by virtue of common light." Let's have a look at how men have been improving their natural abilities (Romans 3:10-12 [we're not doing much with them]; 8:7, 8 [apart from faith, we can't please God]). So Romans 3 says we wouldn't improve our natural abilities, and Romans 8 says that, apart from faith, we couldn't please God even if we wanted to.

The implication here is that the gospel doesn't come to anyone for any reason in themselves prior to regeneration. God didn't choose the nation of Israel, for instance, because they were peculiarly well-tuned to receive the truth. Israel received a lot of light, but hear how they're described in Deuteronomy, for instance:

Dt 7:6-8:

⁷ The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: ⁸ But because the LORD loved you. . .

Dt 9:6-13:

⁶ Understand therefore, that the LORD thy God giveth thee not this good land to possess it for thy righteousness; for thou art a stiffnecked people.

And in Dt 10:15-16 the Lord expects a change because of the light they received:

¹⁵ Only the LORD had a delight in thy fathers to love them, and he chose their seed after them, even you above all people, as it is this day. ¹⁶ Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked

Also note that the people of Israel weren't removed from Egypt because they had received the law, and were conforming to it. Rather, the Lord took them out of Egypt, and then gave them the law at Mt. Sinai.

Likewise, Christianity didn't flourish in Europe because Europeans were better than anyone else. Our ancestors were worshiping trees and sacrificing humans too. The Gospel hasn't come to you and me because we're great catches. It's only by the sovereign, electing mercy of God.

4.3 The result of this sovereignty

As a result, we see a strange, un-expectable, and eclectic amalgamation of tribes and tongues from every time and place coming into the kingdom.

Renihan says,

God has determined the boundaries of the spread of the gospel, both extensively and narrowly. With great variety, according to His own counsel, it has reached some people and has been hidden from others¹⁵.

5 The sufficiency of this revelation (§ 4)

Although the gospel be the only outward 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 an effectual insuperable work of the Holy Spirit upon the whole soul, for the producing in them a new spiritual life;(8) without which no other means will effect their conversion unto God.(9)

- Confession passages
 - 8. Ps 110:3; 1Co 2:14; Eph 1:19-20. (the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward)
 - 9. Jn 6:44; 2Co. 4:4,6.
- Waldron passages
 - **Romans 1:16, 17** (the righteousness of God is revealed)
 - **John 6:44** (no man can come except the father draw); **1 Corinthians 1:22-24** (signs/wisdom – stumbling/foolishness); **1 Corinthians 2:14** (the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit); **2 Corinthians 4:4, 6** (darkened by the god of this world)

5.1 The assertion of its sufficiency

Our paragraph says the gospel is “the *only* outward means.” That is, the unconverted can’t find salvation without it. And the gospel is fully sufficient to *reveal* Christ and saving grace.

¹⁵Renihan. Locations 8325-8326.

5.2 The qualification of its sufficiency

But the Gospel as information alone is not sufficient to convert sinners. It can reveal Christ, but it cannot produce a new spiritual life on its own. This is the work of the Holy Spirit upon the whole soul.