

“Reformed Basics”: 5. Salvation

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For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Eph 2:8–10)

1. *The Application of Christ's Work*

Christ paid for his people's sins on the Cross. After his death he rose to new life and is now glorified and exalted. In this part we talk about how Christ's work is applied to believers. Of course, it is the Holy Spirit that takes what Christ has accomplished and applies it to us.¹

2. *We Can't Do It*

We cannot make ourselves pleasing to God. Because Adam represented all his posterity, when he sinned, his sin affected all who are descended from him “by ordinary generation.” Each of us is born with a disposition to selfishness, to seeing ourselves as independent, free to do whatever we want, regardless of our parents, church, or God himself. If we have a good upbringing we also develop many virtues. We may be good citizen, spouses, parents, or workers.² Nevertheless we inherit a sinful disposition that fundamentally puts ourselves at the center of our universe.

We are powerless of ourselves to change this disposition. We are incapable of ourselves of living up to God's standards. Paul said to the believers at Ephesus: “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked... in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind...” (Eph 2:1–2) Apart from God's grace we are dead to spiritual things, unresponsive and unable to change. As our Lord put it to Nicodemus, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (John 3:3) To respond to God we need a rebirth.

¹ Those familiar with the Reformed faith may have wondered how we can have gotten to the fifth of six parts without discussing anything that is distinctly Reformed. Note that the first part's presentation of Scripture and inspiration is distinctly Reformed, as is the discussion of Christ in salvation history. Note also that the discussions of God, humanity, and Christ in parts 2–4 are all necessary foundations for this part. Shorter presentations of the Reformed faith can be shorter because they assume these. We hold the teachings of 2–4 in common with other Christian churches. In this part we discuss the “doctrines of grace.” They are distinctly Reformed. We believe that these doctrines were taught by our Lord and his apostles. They are present in the Church Fathers, especially in Augustine. These doctrines became obscured in later church history. They were rediscovered and championed by Martin Luther and later by John Calvin.

² That humanity is not as bad as it might be, that there is much good in the world, and in ourselves, is God's *common grace*. God restrains human evil for the sake of his Church.

3. *God Said: “Let There be Light”... in our Hearts*

To be saved from our spiritual deadness we need a mighty work of the Holy Spirit in us. We need to be reborn. Our Catechism (SC 31) describes God’s regenerating work in a human heart as *effectual calling*.³ Effectual calling has several components:

- The Spirit “convinces us of our sin and misery”: we see our need of a Savior.
- He “enlightens our minds in the knowledge of Jesus Christ”: we see Christ as the Savior we need.
- He “renews our wills”: we are enabled to act on our knowledge of our misery and Christ’s goodness.
- He “persuades and enables us to embrace Jesus Christ”: we believe in and rely on Jesus Christ alone for our salvation.

In a sense we don’t experience effectual calling directly: the enlightening of our minds and the renewing of our wills takes place at a level deeper than our consciousness. We do experience the consequences of that calling: we see our sin and turn away from it, and we trust Christ to be our Savior. As our Lord put it, “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (John 3:8)

4. *Justification, Sanctification, and the Role of Good Works*

We realize, when we are honest, that we don’t measure up to God’s standard of goodness. We don’t even measure up to our own standards. When the Spirit “convinces us of our sin and misery” we know we have no excuse before our holy Creator. How can we possibly be accepted by him?

When we “embrace Jesus Christ as he is freely offered in the Gospel,” we find that God accepts our Lord’s sacrifice on the Cross on our behalf. On the Cross he underwent the punishment that was due to us. His punishment is substituted for our punishment. Christ’s standing before his Father as righteous, that is, in perfect conformity to the Father’s will, is imputed or reckoned to us. This is not because we have earned this standing: we cannot. But as we put our faith in Jesus, his righteousness becomes ours. The Catechism (SC 33) calls this *justification*: “Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.”

We have not earned this new standing. We have done nothing to merit it. Our faith in Christ, our trusting in his sacrifice to pay for our sin, is the means by which God brings us to himself. But our faith, our believing in Christ, is only the instrument by which this happens, not an act that earns God’s favor.

So, having come to Christ in faith, am I to remain as weak and sinful as I was? Not at all: when I embrace Christ I do not want to remain as I am, but I want to please Christ and be more like him. As Paul says, I was “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that [I] should walk in them.” (Eph 2:10) Everyone who is called “effectually”

³ Every person is called to repent of sin. But for his chosen ones, God makes this call effectual, that is, effective.

(effectively) will want to obey Christ and become more like him.⁴ Someone who does not acknowledge Christ as their Lord has not truly come to him.

Thus our life in Christ is marked by two dynamics: on the one hand, we want to please God more and more, but on the other hand, our standing with God, our acceptance by him, never depends on our success or progress in holiness. We do not, we cannot, earn our place with the Father, but we long to “always do what is pleasing to him.” (John 8:29) We rely on God’s *grace*, the unmerited favor God shows toward his children. We do not rely on “works,” on our performance.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Eph 2:8–10)

5. *Adoption into God’s Family*

We have described justification, our being declared righteous in God’s sight for Christ’s sake; and sanctification, our being transformed over time to resemble Christ more and more. The third great benefit of effectual calling that we receive in this life is *adoption*. The language of adoption, of being part of God’s family, pervades the New Testament. Some examples:

“But to all who did receive [Christ], who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God...” (John 1:12)

“In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ...” (Eph 1:5)

“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son...so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.” (Gal 4:4–7)

The passages make the same point: the purpose of Christ’s coming was to bring God’s people into his family. We are not naturally members of God’s family. But by adopting us he makes us his children.⁵

What does it mean to be adopted? Firstly it means a new identity. In human terms, I get a new name, new parents and siblings, a new standing before the law. I have a new family code to live up to, new expectations of me. I am to think of myself differently.

Adoption also means new privileges. The resources of the family are mine now. Eventually I will inherit the full riches of the family. The greatest privilege is access to God as my Father. I can

⁴ The Catechism (SC 35) calls this process (and it is a process) *sanctification*: “Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.” The Catechism refers to justification as an “act” of God’s grace: it happens once. It calls sanctification a “work” of God’s grace—it continues throughout our life.

⁵ The New Testament consistently speaks of “sons” rather than “sons and daughters.” This is not meant to exclude women from these privileges. On the contrary, in the New Testament world women never inherited from their fathers, but in God’s family male and female alike are heirs.

come to him freely and without reserve, knowing I will be welcomed, listened to, and provided for.⁶

Our Father is also protective of us. He will see to it that we do not suffer harm. He also disciplines us, never vindictively or in vengeance (his vengeance was spent on his Son), but he knows when to leave us for a time to the consequences of our folly. As the writer to the Hebrews put it:

It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. (Heb 12:7–10)

A final aspect of our adoption is the presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee of our inheritance. As the Spirit prompts us to go to God as our Father, that prompting is a benefit now, and a promise of a greater inheritance to come. We are “sealed” with the Spirit—marked as God’s possession.

6. Jesus’ Own Will Make It to the End

They, whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved. (CF 17.1)

This doctrine is called “the perseverance of the saints”: those who belong to Jesus will persevere in his grace through their lives and finally come to full salvation. They may often stumble or remain disobedient for a time, but God will always renew his grace in them.

This doctrine would be better named “the perseverance of God on behalf of the saints.” Your salvation has always depended on God, rather than on you. Before you came to Christ you were spiritually dead. Before you were aware of his work, God brought you to life and “persuaded and enabled” you to trust Christ. God’s purpose to regenerate you does not change, because he does not change. “For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.” (Mal 3:6) If he has given you his Son and his Spirit, he will give you all you need to finish your journey to him. Your Great Shepherd will never lose a sheep:

I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. (John 10:28–29)

Not only is your Shepherd pledged to protect you. You are a gift from the Father, who is greater than all, to the Son. No one will steal a gift from the Father to the Son.

⁶ This can be difficult to grasp for those whose earthly fathers were absent or unwelcoming. How important is it for us as parents to model God’s Fatherhood to our children, and how vital that we display the same brotherly care for our siblings in God’s family!

But note that this doctrine teaches perseverance *in grace*. The Confession asserts that we “can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace.” But every Christian stumbles, and we know we are likely to stumble when we neglect God’s means of grace. Our Shepherd’s promise of protection is no excuse for carelessness on our part. “Churches in the Reformation tradition have never taught a bare doctrine of preservation. They affirm a biblical doctrine of perseverance.”⁷

We are preserved by God’s grace, but we are preserved by our perseverance. This is what Peter taught: we are to be “all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election.” Only “if you practice these qualities” does he promise “you will never fall.” (2 Pet 1:10) We persevere in grace and thus are preserved.

It should be clear that there is no encouragement in the doctrine of perseverance for the idea that someone can profess to be a Christian and live a life of disobedience. As John put it, “No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God.” (1 John 3:9) Perseverance is promised to those whom God has regenerated. A regenerated person will show evidence, however uneven or halting, of a new life.

Let us follow Jesus down the hard path of obedience, and avoid the “easy” road of sin. Let us turn to Christ when we falter, reminding the Lord in our prayers that by his power he can keep us from totally or finally falling away from sin. After all, it is by ‘God’s power’ that we ‘are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.’ It is through trusting in Christ, the Scripture assures us, that you will obtain ‘the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.’ (1 Pet. I:5, 9).⁸

7. *Can I Know that I am Saved? Yes!*

If all Jesus’ own are guaranteed to make it to the end, ultimately to be saved, can I know with certainty that I am Jesus’ own? Yes. Do I need a special revelation from God to be assured that I belong to God? No: I can be assured of my salvation by “ordinary means.”

Why is it important to have this *assurance of salvation*? If I am constantly wondering if God has actually done a work of grace in me I won’t have confidence to approach the Father; I will doubt his goodness toward me; I will lack confidence in his care for me; I will fail to be thankful; and I will be distracted from my duty.

It is possible for a person to be deceived about their standing with God. Recall our Lord’s chilling words near the end of the Sermon on the Mount:

Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’ (Matt 7:21–23)

⁷ Chad van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, Banner of Truth, 2014. p. 218

⁸ *Confessing the Faith*, 219.

Some of his hearers thought that because they had rubbed shoulders with Jesus, and indeed had participated in his ministry, they were in good standing. Yet our Lord was to say to them finally, “I never knew you.”

What then marks the true disciple? Jesus goes on to say that the true disciple has built his life on Jesus’ words: “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.” (Matt 7:24–25) Van Dixhoorn summarizes the connection between faithful obedience and assurance of grace:

There exists a clear association in Scripture between faith and obedience on the one hand and a certainty of God's grace toward us in Christ on the other. Would you like to know if you “have come to know him”, that you “have passed out of death into life”? ... that is [why John] puts down some frequently asked questions and then provides clear answers. If you want to know if you have “eternal life”, then “believe in the name of the Son of God”, “obey the Lord's commands,” “love the brother”—and make sure that you are not loving “in word or talk but in deed and in truth” (1 John 2:3; 3:14, 18, 19, 21, 24; 5:13). Then all that will remain for you is to “rejoice in the hope of the glory of God” and, as Paul told the Romans, that hope will never “put us to shame” (Rom. 5:2, 5).⁹

The Confession reminds us that “[t]his infallible assurance does not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be partaker of it.” (18.3) Not all who have true faith have assurance of it, and some believers find it difficult to come to assurance. If you are a professing Christian yet find yourself beset by doubts about your standing with God, you are to employ the “ordinary means of grace”: worship with God’s people, hearing the Word from your pastor and participating in the sacraments; exercising yourself in thankful prayer; immersing yourself in the fellowship of God’s people. (Heb 6:11–12) God does sometimes, for his own holy reasons, permit his own to struggle. (Psalm 77) Yet he always supports them, and brings them at last to “joy and peace in the Holy Spirit.”

8. *God Chooses His People*

If I am saved only because of divine intervention and if I can’t save myself (actually, of myself I don’t want to be saved, since that requires dethroning myself as the king of my life), then God must choose to work in me to bring me to his Son. His work is not accidental but springs from his intention. In Scripture, this aspect of God’s work, his choosing to save his people, is called *election*.

God’s election, his choosing a people to save, begins with Israel, a people chosen out of all the nations. “For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.” (Deut 7:6) In the New Testament God’s people are similarly chosen—in fact Peter applies this quotation from Deuteronomy to the church (1 Pet 2:9). But individual believers are also spoken of as chosen, or elect:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he

⁹ *Confessing the Faith*, 227.

predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will... (Eph 1:3–5)

As the Apostle says, we were chosen for adoption as God’s children and heirs. Nobody gets adopted by accident—adoption is the result of a deliberate action by the parents.

Election, and the larger category of predestination, is a difficult topic. It involves God’s secret decisions. We know about election only insofar as God reveals it to us. Our Confession cautions us to tread carefully here.

The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination [of which election is a part] is to be handled with special prudence and care, that men, attending the will of God revealed in his Word, and yielding obedience thereunto, may, from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election. So shall this doctrine afford matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God; and of humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all that sincerely obey the gospel. (CF 3.8)

We must be careful in this matter to say only what God has revealed and not to speculate about things hidden from us.

Why do the Scriptures even talk about election? In the quotation above, the Confession gives one answer: to give us confidence that God will stick with us through our lives, as we have discussed.

The other reason election is taught in the New Testament is to explain why some who ought to believe don’t believe. In Rom 9–11 Paul is agonizing over the failure of most of his Jewish brethren to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah. Paul ascribes the choice of some as reflecting God’s election. God’s choice to save some, but not all, the Jews is his secret will, his sovereign choice.

This can be hard for us. Why doesn’t God choose to save everybody? We don’t know, and we are not invited to speculate. We know that God is just and good. The prophet describes God’s work of judgment as “alien” and “strange.” (Isa 28:21) If we are tempted to think of God as arbitrary or capricious in election, we remember that he reveals himself as the shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep on the hillside to seek the one lost sheep. (Matt 16:12–14) He is the compassionate Messiah that laments Jerusalem’s refusal of him. (Matt 23:37–38) As the Apostle thinks about these things he is driven to worship:

For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

“For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?”

“Or who has given a gift to him?
that he might be repaid?”

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.
(Rom 11:32–36)

9. For Further Reading

Our church’s subordinate standard, the Westminster Shorter Catechism, describes our salvation in questions 29–38. The Catechism is available here:

<https://opc.org/sc.html>

The Westminster Confession discusses the perseverance of the saints and assurance of grace in ch. 17–18:
https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_17

9.1 *Videos*

R. C. Sproul on effectual calling:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qh08V8MKda8>

R.C.Sproul on adoption and union with Christ:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLrDCtaeJ4cE>

Guy Richard on adoption:
<https://rts.edu/resources/wisdom-wednesday-with-dr-guy-richard/>

9.2 *Books*

The material on perseverance and assurance is drawn from Chad van Dixhoorn's helpful exposition of the Confession: Chad van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, Banner of Truth, 2014.