

“Because Adam Transgressed ”

An Exposition of the Belgic Confession—Article Fourteen

Article 14: The Creation and Fall of Man

We believe that God created man from the dust of the earth¹ and made and formed him in his image and likeness—good, just, and holy; able by his own will to conform in all things to the will of God.² But when he was in honor he did not understand it and did not recognize his excellence. But he subjected himself willingly to sin and consequently to death and the curse,³ lending his ear to the word of the devil. For he transgressed the commandment of life, which he had received, and by his sin he separated himself from God, who was his true life, having corrupted his entire nature. So he made himself guilty and subject to physical and spiritual death, having become wicked, perverse, and corrupt in all his ways.⁴

He lost all his excellent gifts which he had received from God,⁵ and he retained none of them except for small traces which are enough to make him inexcusable.⁶ Moreover, all the light in us is turned to darkness, as the Scripture teaches us: “The light shone in the darkness,⁷ and the darkness did not receive it” (John 1:5). Here John calls men “darkness.”

Therefore we reject everything taught to the contrary concerning man’s free will, since man is nothing but the slave of sin (John 8:34) and cannot do a thing unless it is “given him from heaven” (John 3:27). For who can boast of being able to do anything good by himself, since Christ says, “No one can come to me unless my Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44)? Who can glory in his own will when he understands that “the mind of the flesh is enmity against God” (Romans 8:7)? Who can speak of his own knowledge in view of the fact that “the natural man does not understand the things of the Spirit of God” (1 Corinthians 2:14)? In short, who can produce a single thought, since he knows that we are “not able to think a thing” about ourselves, by ourselves, but that “our ability is from God” (2 Corinthians 5:3)? And therefore, what the apostle says ought rightly to stand fixed and firm: “God works within us both to will and to do according to his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13). For there is no understanding nor will conforming to God’s understanding and will apart from Christ’s work, as he teaches us when he says, “Without me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

¹Gen 2:7, 3:19; Ecc 12:7 ²Gen 1:26-27; Eph 4:24; Col 3:10 ³Gen 3:16-19; Rom 5:12 ⁴Gen 2:17; Eph 2:1, 4:18 ⁵Ps 94:11; Rom 3:10, 8:6 ⁶Rom 1:20-21 ⁷Eph 5:8

After God created all things in six days, he rested on the seventh day, gloriously enthroned to rule over all that he had made. According to the Genesis account, after God saw that all he had made was “very good” (Genesis 1:31), he then pronounced his divine benediction upon creation. But the high point of the creation account occurs on the sixth day, when God creates the first man, Adam, from the dust of the earth to rule over the world as God’s vice-regent. The Bible teaches that Adam is the biological head of the human race, the first human from whom all men and women biologically descend, and that Adam also stands as the federal head of the human race, acting as our representative before God during the time of probation in Eden. It was in this capacity as our biological and federal head that Adam broke God’s commandment not to eat from the tree and thereby plunged himself as well as all of his descendants (us)

into sin and misery.

Having set forth the doctrines of creation and providence in Articles Twelve and Thirteen, our confession turns to the creation and fall of Adam in Article Fourteen, before describing the consequences of Adam's fall upon the entirety of our race in Article Fifteen, which deals with original sin. The creation of the first man from the dust of the earth is the crowning jewel of the creation account.¹ Even though God's creation of all things visible and invisible out of nothing *ex nihilo*—an act which gives all things their form and purpose—has already been discussed in Article Twelve, the Confession now devotes a separate article to the creation of Adam and his fall into sin. The creation and fall of Adam sets the tone for all of the material discussed in Articles Sixteen through Twenty-Six of our confession, which collectively deal with the various aspects of our redemption from sin and which play out against the backdrop of Adam's fall as set forth in Articles Fourteen and Fifteen. We can neither fully understand nor remotely appreciate the greatness of God's grace in saving us from the guilt and power of sin, unless we are clear about the consequences of Adam's rebellion against God.

Article Fourteen is divided into three main sections. The first section simply summarizes the biblical teaching that Adam (as the biological and federal head of the human race) was created in God's image, and subject to the commandment of life, often spoken of by Reformed Christians as the covenant of works.² The second point made in this article is that Adam's fall into sin not only brought down the covenant curses upon himself, but upon all of his descendants. Third, our confession addresses the sad fact that after the fall, neither Adam nor his descendants are capable of doing anything good which can restore us to favor with God. Because of the fall of Adam, we are all born enslaved to the guilt and power of sin, under God's just condemnation, certain to face death, and completely unable to do anything to redeem ourselves from our dire predicament. If we do not understand the gravity and consequences of Adam's sin, we will never see God's grace as the source of all that is good. If we do not believe that sin affects every part of us, we will look for that one good thing in ourselves which, supposedly, causes God to save us. If we do this, we will never give God all the glory which is due him.

With this in mind, let us look at the first part of article fourteen, which summarizes the biblical teaching regarding Adam's creation in the image of God.

Our confession summarizes the biblical teaching such as that found in Genesis 2:4-25 as follows: "We believe that God created man from the dust of the earth and made and formed him in his image and likeness—good, just, and holy; able by his own will to conform in all things to the will of God." The author not only makes the point that Adam was created immediately and directly by an act of God—which excludes all forms of naturalistic evolution as the source of the human race—but our confession also affirms the New Testament teaching regarding what it means to be created in God's image. In Colossians 3:10 and Ephesians 4:24, Paul tells us that Adam possessed true holiness, righteousness, and knowledge. As the divine image bearer, we read in Genesis 1:26 that Adam was given dominion over all the creatures that God had made, and then assigned the task of the creation of godly culture (the so-called cultural mandate). But true righteousness, holiness and knowledge, along with certain elements of Adam's dominion over the creation were lost in the fall and are restored to us only in our redemption.

¹ Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, 115.

² Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, 125-127.

Furthermore, when God created Adam, he formed him from the dust of the ground and breathed life into his body so that Adam became “a living being.” As created, Adam was a psychosomatic unity of body (the material element of human nature) and soul (the immaterial element of human nature). This is known as dichotomy, the view that essential human nature consists of two parts, body and soul.

Trichotomists, on the other hand, believe that men and women are body, soul, *and* spirit, an erroneous position held by some evangelicals, and one which opens the door to gnostic categories.³ The fact that we are created as a psychosomatic unity explains why death is such a terrible thing. Death, which is the penalty for human sin under the terms of the covenant of works, is the tearing apart of body and soul which God has joined together when he created. Death results in the dissolution of the body. We do not “pass away.” Rather, we die. Death is not part of the natural order. We experience the curse in all its horror when the hour of death comes.

It is also very important at this point that we deal with an issue which has become very divisive among the Reformed churches of late—and that is whether or not our confession teaches that there is a covenant based upon a works-principle in Eden and whether or not Adam’s relationship to God was a gracious one or a natural one (i.e. based upon the way in which a creature naturally relates to their creator). Our confession clearly states that Adam’s relationship to God was based upon the fact that Adam’s will did “conform in all things to the will of God.” The relationship which God established with Adam in Eden is a natural and covenantal one. The creature owes their Creator obedience, merely on the grounds that the creature must obey the one who created them.⁴ A covenant of works is, at the very least, implied by the fact of God’s creation of Adam as a rational creature in his own image, who then was given a commandment by God which Adam must obey in order to avoid coming under God’s curse. Adam’s ongoing relationship with God in Eden was based upon the natural ability of the first human to obey and not upon God’s grace, enabling the Adam to be obedient.

As created, Adam did not need God’s grace to obey his creator while in Eden, since Adam was not yet a sinner. According to our confession, Adam was perfectly capable of obeying the commandment of life as set forth in Genesis 2:15-17: “*The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”* This is what the *Westminster Confession* will later describe as the requirement of Adam’s perfect and personal obedience to God’s law (VII.2).

Indeed, If Adam had obeyed God perfectly while in Eden during the period of probation, he would have received the crown of life and then entered into the promised eternal Sabbath rest, having successfully completed his time of probation in Eden.⁵ But if Adam did not obey, he, and all those whom he represents, would come under the curse, which is death.

This point becomes even clearer, when we take note of the fact that our confession speaks of God’s relationship with Adam as a gracious one beginning after the fall. Article Seventeen of our confession

³ See Riddlebarger, “Trichotomy: A Beachhead for Gnostic Influences,” in Modern Reformation (July/August 1995).

⁴ See the essay by Lee Irons, “Redefining Merit: An Examination of Medieval Presuppositions in Covenant Theology,” in Howard Griffith and John R. Muether, eds. Creator, Redeemer, Consummator: A Festschrift for Meredith G. Kline (Jackson, MI: Reformed Academic Press, 2000), 253-269.

⁵ M. G. Kline, Kingdom Prologue, 60-63.

(the recovery of fallen man) makes this point very directly,

“We believe that our good God, by his marvelous wisdom and goodness, seeing that man had plunged himself in this manner into both physical and spiritual death and made himself completely miserable, set out to find him, though man, trembling all over, was fleeing from him. And he comforted him, promising to give him his Son, “born of a woman,” to crush the head of the serpent, and to make him blessed.”

The covenant of grace is not established (historically speaking) until after Adam sinned under the commandment of life (works), a covenant based upon Adam’s perfect obedience. This is important to clarify, because our confession was written in 1561, well before a full-blown covenant theology had been fully developed, and which later came to characterize the Reformed tradition, in the view of the covenants set forth in the *Westminster Confession* of 1647, written eighty-six years later. There is no specific mention of a covenant of works in the Belgic Confession, only a reference to a commandment of life based on Adam’s obedience. Some in our tradition have used this point to argue that Adam’s relationship to God in Eden was not a works-based relationship grounded in Adam’s own perfect obedience to God’s command, but, that God established a gracious relationship with Adam in Eden. In this view, God’s grace enabled Adam to keep God’s commandment and avoid coming under the curse. But the consequences of this interpretation are quite serious and are now surfacing in many Reformed churches and denominations, creating tremendous confusion about the role of the law and gospel as well as the proper understanding of the doctrine of justification.

For one thing, a gracious covenant in Eden has the effect of making God’s relationship to Adam before the fall virtually the same as our relationship to God after the fall—contrary to what is clearly taught in texts like Romans 5:12-19, and which is stated in our confession. Second, it also has the serious consequence of under-cutting the law-gospel distinction. Because God’s relationship to Adam is supposedly a gracious one, at its core, the law is then thought of as gracious. While God was gracious in giving the law to his people because the law exposes our sin and our need for a Savior, the commandments themselves are works-based, with blessing promised upon the condition of perfect obedience and curse threatened for any act of disobedience. What is more, God’s commandments both in Eden and in their republication in the Ten Commandments, do not give us any power enabling us to obey them. As John Murray points out, the commandments contain no provision of forgiveness of sins for those who violate them, and they cannot relieve our bondage to sin.⁶ It is Paul who tells us that the purpose of the law is to expose our sin (Romans 7:7-8) and then lead us to Christ (cf. Galatians 3:24).

Denying the works-principle and seeing the law as gracious, allows some of the adherents of this view to argue that Jesus needed to exercise faith as we do—since he like Adam and Abraham stood in a gracious relationship to God and not under a covenant of works, so that he needed to believe the promise just as we do to demonstrate covenant faithfulness. Under a gracious covenant, our Lord’s own personal obedience establishes his own justification, not ours, completely undercutting the doctrines of Christ’s active obedience and justification through the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. Several have taken this view and wreaked havoc upon those Reformed churches who have not seen it for what it is—an attack

⁶ John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1978), 184-185.

upon the doctrine of justification *sola fide*.⁷ This is a serious error and must be renounced.

That our confession states that Adam was “able by his own will to conform in all things to the will of God,” at the very least supports the traditional Reformed view that a covenant of works was indeed in effect, and that before the fall Adam did not need grace because he was able to obey God’s commandments without any divine enablement. But when Adam broke God’s law, he came under the curse, and now desperately needs grace if he is to be saved. This is the point made in Article Seventeen.

The next section of Article Fourteen deals with the effects of Adam’s act of rebellion upon both himself and his descendants. The confession succinctly describes the willful nature of Adam’s sin and the consequences of his rebellion.

“But when he was in honor he did not understand it and did not recognize his excellence. But he subjected himself willingly to sin and consequently to death and the curse, lending his ear to the word of the devil. For he transgressed the commandment of life, which he had received, and by his sin he separated himself from God, who was his true life, having corrupted his entire nature. So he made himself guilty and subject to physical and spiritual death, having become wicked, perverse, and corrupt in all his ways.”

While the Bible teaches that Eve was deceived, Adam was not deceived (1 Timothy 2:13-15). He rebelled. Adam willingly embraced the devil’s lie made earlier to his wife as recounted in Genesis 3:4-5: “for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” As Eve desired the fruit—seeing it was pleasant to the eye—Adam took and ate the very fruit God commanded him not to eat. Adam acted freely and willfully. He acted in our place as our representative. When Adam sinned, it were as though each one of us sinned personally. This not only demonstrates an utter disregard for the revealed will of God, but from this disregard for God’s law springs forth the specific sins mentioned in the Genesis account—unbelief and pride. At the end of the day, what Adam rejected was God’s authority as creator and covenant Lord, and Adam willfully subjected himself and all of us to the curse.⁸

The consequence of Adam’s rebellion is immediate and cataclysmic upon everyone born since. This is yet another point which divides Christianity from all other religions. Every sickness we have ever suffered, every funeral we have ever attended, every war which has ever been fought, every act of cruelty and theft, every lie and word of slander, has its origins in Adam’s act of rebellion in Eden. Recall that God created all things, and pronounced them “good.” There were no defects or shortcomings in creation. Sin and death are not part of God’s creation, rather they stem from the corruption of creation, when it was subjected to futility (Romans 8:20-21), when Adam sought his own will rather than God’s and brought down the curse upon all of creation.

Through this act of rebellion, Adam introduces the twin principles of sin and death into human existence,

⁷ See, for example, Norman Shepherd, *The Call of Grace* (Phillipsburg: P & R, 2000), 19. Because Jesus was under a gracious covenant as was Abraham, Shepherd states that the fulfillment of the promise, “is made possible through the covenantal righteousness of Jesus Christ. His was a living, active and obedient faith that took him all the way to the cross. This faith was credited as righteousness.” Cf. Cornelius Venema’s review of Shepherd’s book *The Call of Grace* first published in the *Mid-America Journal of Theology*, Volume 13, 2002, 232-248.

⁸ Beets, *The Reformed Confession Explained*, 119.

bringing down all of the horrors just mentioned upon us. Adam transgressed the commandment of life and therefore died. Adam willfully turned his back upon God who was his life. Through this act of rebellion Adam corrupted his whole being (along with ours) and brought spiritual death upon us all, which will manifest itself in physical death. Indeed, barring our Lord's immediate return, we will all die because of what Adam did that day in Eden. There is simply no way to escape the consequences of this act. The course of history cannot be reversed. We cannot go back in time and do it over. The fact of the matter is that it will take a second Adam to undo the consequences of the first man. This is the point made by Paul in I Corinthians 15:45-50, our New Testament lesson this morning. As a result of the fall, human nature must be redeemed, because sinful flesh cannot inherit the kingdom of God. The first man (Adam) was from the earth. But the second Adam comes from heaven to redeem Adam's fallen race.

Finally, our confession takes up some of the specific effects of Adam's sin upon us.

Our confession lists these consequences in some detail, starting with the corruption of human nature.

“He lost all his excellent gifts which he had received from God,⁵ and he retained none of them except for small traces which are enough to make him inexcusable.⁶ Moreover, all the light in us is turned to darkness, as the Scripture teaches us: “The light shone in the darkness,⁷ and the darkness did not receive it” (John 1:5). Here John calls men “darkness.”

The point being made here is that after the fall, we are not merely tainted by sin as though sin makes us weak and inclines us toward sinful choices. Rather, our confession presents the biblical truth about the human condition using the stark and realistic language which the Bible does. As a result of Adam's sin, we are evil and corrupt. While Americans tend to think of people as “basically good,” the Bible presents a much more realistic assessment. While the divine image remains in us, even after the fall, that image is defaced and marred. The remnants of God's good and gracious gifts do not enable us to do the good God requires. For the good God requires of us is perfect obedience to his commandments under the covenant of works. But it is too late for that. We are already guilty for Adam's act and we are all born with a corrupt and sinful nature. This means that we use whatever good gifts which remain, not to glorify God, but to gratify ourselves. Therefore, our sinful use of God's good gifts merely increases our guilt before God. We love darkness rather than light, because our deeds are evil.

But our confession does not set forth the consequences of sin purely for information sake. The fact of human sinfulness explains why people cannot and do not respond to the gospel, apart from a prior and gracious act of God. Why do people love to sin? Why do they so obstinately refuse God's gracious offer of forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. Why don't people flock into churches where the gospel is preached? This too is a consequence of Adam's sin. Our confession puts it this way:

“Therefore we reject everything taught to the contrary concerning man's free will, since man is nothing but the slave of sin (John 8:34) and cannot do a thing unless it is “given him from heaven” (John 3:27). For who can boast of being able to do anything good by himself, since Christ says, “No one can come to me unless my Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44)? Who can glory in his own will when he understands that “the mind of the flesh is enmity against God” (Romans 8:7)? Who can speak of his own knowledge in view of the fact that “the natural man does not understand the things of the Spirit of God” (1 Corinthians 2:14)? In short, who can produce a single thought, since he knows that we are “not able to think a thing” about ourselves, by ourselves, but that “our ability is from God” (2 Corinthians 5:3)? And therefore, what the apostle says ought rightly to stand fixed and firm: “God works within us both to will and to do

according to his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13). For there is no understanding nor will conforming to God’s understanding and will apart from Christ’s work, as he teaches us when he says, “Without me you can do nothing” (John 15:5)”

Because of Adam’s fall, we are born wicked and corrupt. Sin affects every part of us, including our wills. This does not mean that we are robots and cannot make choices—as amateur Calvinists often seem to imply. It does mean that we always make our choices in the light of our sinful desires and affections. God is Holy and we are sinful. Since he demands perfect obedience of us, we hate him. We do not want to choose life, because we don’t want it nor think we need it. We are slaves to sin so that we make sinful choices because we want to. We are born hostile to God and can do nothing to please him apart from his grace and apart from divine enabling. We have gouged out our spiritual eyes and ears, cut off our spiritual arms and legs and then dare complain about our fate. But this is the nature of sin. It is utterly destructive. But we love it anyway. We know that sin separates us from God who is our life, but we’d rather die and enjoy the passing pleasure of rebellion. “Buy now, pay later” is our motto. This is what Adam’s act of rebellion has done to each and every one of us. It condemned him. It condemns us.

While we could spend hours fleshing all of the ramifications of this article of our confession, there are several points of application we should now make.

First, Adam was created through a direct act of God to bear the divine image. Not only does this preclude all forms of naturalistic evolution—Adam does not have animal ancestors—it gives Adam a dignity and worth beyond that of any and all other creatures. Because of this fact, Adam reflects the glory of his creator, a glory which is unlike any animal, a glory which we still retain, in part, even after the fall. As Cornelius Van Til once put it, “man is like God in every way that a creature can be like God.”⁹ This is no small thing.

This not only explains human dignity—we are, after all, just a bit lower than the heavenly beings, the angels (Psalm 8:5)—but it also explains the great tragedy of human sin. It is a divine image bearer who is forced to “dumpster-dive” and who sleeps on the street, intoxicated or in a chemical fog. It is a divine image bearer who is aborted from their mother’s womb or whose life is taken in an inner-city drive by. It is a divine image-bearer who slanders another divine image bearer with their speech, or harms them with acts of violence. The Christian view of humanity teaches us that men and women are not mere animals at the top of the food chain, but that we are all divine image-bearers. Human life, even after the fall, is precious and is so much more than mere electrical impulse surging through nerves and muscles.

Were it not for the fact that Adam bears the divine image, then what is wrong with murder? Animals commit no crime when they kill. Why shouldn’t the strong take advantage of the weak? On secularist presuppositions, this is the natural order of things. What is wrong with exploiting others if we can get away with it? Why should we try and help those who make foolish choices and who waste their lives? If we all are not divine image-bearers then there is no good reason to do any of these things. Neither secularists, nor Eastern religions, nor paganism, can give a satisfactory answer to these questions. But if we are divine image bearers, then even one single life going to waste is a tragedy. Every single human being possesses in some measure the good gifts given Adam by his creator. Only Christianity gives humanity such worth and dignity.

⁹ C. Van Til, Defense of the Faith, 13.

A second thing we need to point out is that death is not natural. The creation account and the fall are not religious myths, but are part of the historical record of the human race, a point empirically verified whenever death strikes. Why do we weep when death comes? Why is the loss so great and the situation so sad? Why? Because death is not natural and we all know it! Death is the result of human sin and the curse. We all sinned in Adam, we all commit acts of sin, therefore, we will all die. While the Bible does not give us all of the details of Adam's life in Eden, Adam's fall and the tragedy of human sin is the fundamental fact underlying the entire Bible from Genesis 2-Revelation 22. From the moment of Adam's act of rebellion, God was already present in his grace and mercy, promising to redeem his elect who embrace the promise of redemption through faith, promising to be our God and to make us his people once again. Following this biblical pattern—our confession devotes the vast majority of its discussion to the various dimensions of our redemption from sin, for in this the Bible itself is centered. Death is not natural. Jesus Christ came to defeat death and destroy it forever. This is a message we must certainly believe and confess as a church to a culture which denies the meaning of death while at the same time going to unbelievable lengths to escape the inevitable. Only Christianity can effectively deal with death and its consequences.

Third, we must develop our view of human sin and its consequences from the biblical account and not take one from the culture around us. The Bible neither downplays the gravity of human sin nor despairs because of the awful nature of human conduct. The fall was very, very bad. The Bible does not blush when describing the human condition nor sinful acts. The Bible is a book full of sexual sins and violence. In Adam we fell a long way—into sin and death, under the curse, enslaved to both the guilt and power of sin. Indeed, apart from Jesus Christ, we can do nothing.

In his grace, God did not annihilate the human race and start over. Even though we can do nothing to save ourselves, God sent a second Adam from heaven to do what the first Adam from the dust did not do, to endure a time of temptation without sin, and then take upon himself the guilt of our sins so that we might be redeemed.

Our confession simply reminds us of what the Bible teaches, that our confidence should not be placed in the human will, nor in human ability, nor in human goodness. Rather our confidence should be placed in our creator (whose image we bear), who is also our redeemer, and who sent the second Adam to undo all of the consequences of human sin. He will not only restore us to that innocent status Adam had in Eden, but he will also glorify us so that sin is never again a possibility. The covenant of confirmation, the blessing Adam would have been given had he obeyed God and cast the serpent from the temple garden, will be ours. We will enter our Sabbath rest and receive all the blessings promised to us.

But because Adam transgressed the commandment of life, our redemption cannot come about until a second Adam comes and obeys the commandment of life (the covenant of works), so that we can be saved under a covenant of grace. The bad news is very bad. Our predicament is dire. But the good news is very good and the second Adam did not transgress the law and was raised for our justification, so that all of the horrible effects of sin are overturned, and the divine image we each possess, will be restored to its original glory (and then some). For what the first Adam did, the second Adam undoes! And where sin abounds, grace super-abounds.