

“God Set Out to Find Him ”

An Exposition of Article Seventeen of the Belgic Confession.

Article 17: The Recovery of Fallen Man

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.¹ 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.²

¹Gen 3:9 ²Gen 22:18; Is 7:14; Jn 1:14, 5:46, 7:42; Acts 13:32-33; Rom 1:2-3; Gal 3:16

One of the most poignant passages in all the Bible is Genesis 3:8-9. Adam sinned against God and is hiding among the trees, fully aware of what he has done and absolutely terrified of God’s presence. Before Adam sinned, God’s approach was the most delightful moment of the day. Now Adam is completely ashamed of what he had done. He is crushed by the guilt of his sins, the sentence of death hangs over his head. For the first time in his life, Adam is alienated from his creator. In his grace and mercy, it is God who approaches Adam, calling out to him, “where are you?”—not because God didn’t know where Adam was, but to rescue Adam from the consequences of what he had just done. It has been the case that God sets out to find lost sinners ever since.

Adam’s guilt and alienation from God is our own. Because we all sinned in Adam (he, being our biological and federal head), and have committed numerous sins ourselves, we too are estranged from God, guilty for our sins, and terrified of God’s approach. Nevertheless, God is as merciful to us as he was to Adam. He still comes to each one of us in the person of Jesus Christ, calling out, “where are you?” to deliver us from the guilt and power of our sins and to comfort us with the promise of his favor toward us in the person of his son.

Article Seventeen of the Belgic Confession concisely describes God’s plan of redemption, which is the historical demonstration of God’s mercy in rescuing Adam and his fallen children from the guilt and power of their sins. Articles Sixteen, Seventeen and Eighteen of the confession serve as a kind of theological hinge, connecting what has gone before in the prior articles—creation, providence and the fall—with what comes after, including God’s eternal decree to rescue a significant part of Adam’s fallen race from their sins, a plan which is accomplished solely through the person and work of Jesus Christ. This plan of redemption was decreed by God from before the foundation of the world, is executed in time and space in the form of a covenant of grace (in which God seeks sinners), and a covenant whose mediator is none other than the person of Jesus Christ, which brings us to the incarnation. All three of these articles are clearly related.

Article Sixteen of discusses the doctrine of divine election, in which God demonstrates his mercy, by

sovereignly choosing to save a multitude of fallen sinners so vast they cannot be counted (the doctrine of election), while he leaves those whom he does choose to suffer the just consequences of their sins (the doctrine of reprobation). Here, in Article Seventeen, we read of how God will work out his plan to save those whom he has chosen through the seed of the woman, who is Jesus Christ. As soon as Adam sinned, God was there in the Garden of Eden promising to rescue those elect descendants of Adam through what will be manifest in biblical history as the covenant of grace.¹ In Article Eighteen, we read of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, who is that one in whom we have been chosen, and that one who is the mediator of God's covenant of grace. God's decree of election cannot be separated from the working out of that decree in redemptive history and the covenant of grace. Nor can election and redemptive history be discussed apart from the incarnation of our Lord.

In articles two-seven of the confession, Reformed Christians confess that God is an infinite spiritual being who remains unknown unless he chooses to reveal himself. This he does both through nature and in the Scriptures (cf. Article Two). But it is the mode and manner of God's revelation of himself in the Scriptures which brings us to God's promise to save his elect in the person of Jesus Christ, the seed of the woman, who will crush the serpent and yet suffer greatly himself when he redeems all those given him by the Father (Genesis 3:15).

Just as our confession briefly set forth the biblical teaching regarding election in Article Sixteen, without addressing any of the controversies, so too, our confession speaks of the execution of God's decree to save his elect in brief and the most general of terms. Article Seventeen reads as follows, "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." Since the Belgic Confession was written in 1561, and a fully-developed covenant theology did not come about until some fifty years or so later, in Article Seventeen the confession lays out a basic skeletal structure of what later comes to be known as the covenant of grace. In the balance of our discussion of this article, we will add some flesh and muscle to the redemptive-historical skeleton given us by the author of our confession.

Following the cue given us in this article, as we consider the execution of God's eternal decree in time and space in the form of a covenant of grace, we surely need to keep the big picture of redemptive history in mind. In contrast to general revelation of God, the Scriptures are the self-revelation of God in human history unfolding through a series of historical events, in which God speaks and acts to redeem sinful men and women.² The ramifications of this conception of redemptive history are profound. For one thing, this means that Christianity is necessarily grounded in a series of covenants and necessarily linked to that series of historical events in which God has done what is necessary for his people to be delivered from the guilt and power of sin. If these historical events are true and really occurred, then Christianity is true. If these events did not occur, then Christianity cannot be true. This is why Christianity is not primarily a system of ethics, but rather a religion of God's speaking and doing to save his people.

For another thing, the drama of redemption is a panoramic vision extending from the creation of the world in the opening chapters of Genesis, to our final redemption as depicted in Revelation 22. The

¹ Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, 139.

² Michael Horton, The Christian Faith, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 44-47; Geerhardus Vos, Biblical Theology (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1977), 5-8.

redemptive-historical horizon includes the past, the present and the future. This pattern has been followed by de Brés as we consider the way in which the various articles have been arranged, moving from election, to the covenant of grace, to the incarnation of the covenant mediator.

Given the arrangement of the articles of our confession, it is important that we step back from the details of biblical history and look at the overall scheme. We must gaze upon the entire panorama of redemption from a distance before trying to make sense of the details. The story begins with creation. Next, we consider the fall of the human race into sin as the backdrop for redemptive history. Redemptive history is exactly what its name implies—the biblical account of God delivering his people from the guilt and power of sin resulting from the fall. Then, we look ahead to see the final goal. But the end is not merely paradise regained. The final goal is paradise glorified! As one writer reminds us, “in very broad terms the biblical sweep is from creation to the new creation by way of redemption, which is, in effect, the renewing of creation.”³ This sweeping vision is set out in the opening chapters of God’s self-revelation. Genesis 1 and 2 which speak of creation and paradise, while Genesis 3 speaks of the fall into sin and paradise lost—the same order set out in our confession.

As we see in Genesis 3:15, from the very moment paradise is lost and the curse is pronounced upon the race, God is already promising final redemption. We need not wait until the end of the story to learn that God’s mercy and justice will triumph over human sin and its consequences for God’s people. Even before the specific details in the drama of redemptive history begin to unfold, the outcome is certain. Before Adam rebelled, God had already decreed that he will redeem his people from their sin and that one day he will renew his creation. When all is said and done, there will remain no hint or trace of the stain of sin. No longer will there be any curse. Why? God promised this to Adam and Eve, just moments after the human race had fallen into sin.

In order to understand Jesus Christ’s role in fulfilling this promise, we must understand something about the various covenants which are found throughout both testaments. Covenants between kings (suzerains) and their vassals (servants) formed the basis of much of daily life in the ancient near-eastern world, especially in matters legal and financial. This was certainly true for ancient Israel. From a biblical perspective, covenants take on even greater importance, since Israel’s king (suzerain) is the great king, and the nation is his chosen vassal because of his sovereign will.

When considered in the context of the Old Testament, a covenant may be defined as “a relationship under sanctions.”⁴ In each of the Old Testament covenants there are two parties involved, God and his people, or their divinely chosen representative such as Abraham or Moses. In these covenantal relationships, the two parties relate to each other in terms of blessing and curse, the outcome depending upon faithfulness to the terms set forth by the covenants. Like a contract of sorts, when terms of the covenant are fulfilled, the servant receives the blessing promised by the great king. But should the obligations of the covenant not be met, the covenant curse, in the form of previously agreed upon sanctions between God and his people, is imposed.

The major covenants in the Old Testament take two basic forms, covenants of promise and covenants of law. In covenants of promise and blessing, God himself swears the covenant oath to fulfill all the terms

³ William J. Dumbrell, The Search for Order: Biblical Eschatology in Focus (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994), 9.

⁴ Meredith G. Kline, By Oath Consigned (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1967), 16.

and conditions of the covenant. In covenants of works or law, the people of God swear the oath of ratification.⁵ The most prominent case of the former—a covenant of promise—is God’s covenant with Abraham as recorded in Genesis 15—the historical manifestation of the covenant of grace. In many ways, this covenant is the historical out-working of God’s first promise to Adam and Eve. Just as God sought Adam, it is God who sovereignly approaches Abram and swears on oath to him—“*Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.*”

As Abram falls into a deep sleep, he is given a vision of a smoking firepot passing through butchered halves of various animals, a goat, a ram, a dove and a pigeon. The implication of the vision is clear to someone like Abraham steeped in ancient covenants and rituals of ratification. If YHWH fails to be Abram’s great reward and shield, the covenant curse, which is graphically pictured by the severed animals, is to fall upon YHWH himself, the one who swears the oath and initiates the covenant rituals. When the dream ends, we are told, “on that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram” (18). Notice that in this particular covenant which God makes with Abram, it is God who swears the oath of ratification, making this covenant a covenant of grace (promise), just as he had done with Adam.

Perhaps the clearest illustration of the latter type of covenant—a covenant of law—is found in Exodus 24, in which the people of God, not YHWH, swear the covenant oath of ratification. According to Exodus 24, YHWH called Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, along with seventy elders, up to Mount Sinai where the group was to worship him at a distance. But Moses—the covenant mediator anticipating the true covenant mediator, Jesus Christ—was to approach God alone. “*Then [Moses] took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, ‘All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient (v. 7).*” Unlike the covenant of promise that God made with Abram, in covenants of works/law, such as the covenant ratified at Sinai, God does not swear the oath of ratification. Rather, it is the people who do so. The covenant God made with Israel is ratified by his people, who by swearing their obedience on oath, will receive the promised blessings of the Mosaic covenant if they obey, or the covenant curses if they disobey. The particular blessings and curses associated with this covenant are spelled out in Deuteronomy 27-30.⁶

With the distinction between these two kinds of covenants—promise and law—in mind, we now turn to the two overarching covenants hinted at in seed form in our confession, the covenant of works and the covenant of grace, under which the individual covenants of law and promise are to be subsumed. This is a very important point to keep in mind, because the covenant of works and the covenant of grace progressively unfold throughout the Old Testament. The way in which they do says a great deal about how we are to understand the Bible and why we must keep God’s promise to redeem Adam through the seed of the woman (Jesus Christ) at the center of all that follows throughout the Old Testament.

These two over-arching covenants enable us to see the continuity which exists between the individual covenants we find throughout the Old Testament. The covenant God makes with Abraham, and then subsequently with his descendants Isaac and Jacob, and then with Israel, are not isolated covenants with no organic connection with what goes before or after. Rather, the particular covenants which God makes with his people are individual and repeated ratifications of the one covenant of grace, which is first promised in Eden, and then later ratified with Abraham, the father of all those who believe.

⁵ Kline, *By Oath Consigned*, 16.

⁶ Kline, *By Oath Consigned*, 14-22.

Seeing the essential continuity between these covenants is important at a number of levels. For one thing, this prevents us from mistakenly seeing the Old Testament as essentially law and the New Testament as essentially gospel. Rather, there is law and gospel found in both testaments. This covenantal structure also enables us to safeguard the clear teaching of the New Testament, that there is but one gospel (Galatians 3:8), one plan of salvation (Ephesians 1:4-6), one covenant mediator (1 Timothy 2:5) and one common faith (Ephesians 4:4-6). This also enables us to understand how the individual covenants in the Old Testament are often framed in terms of promise, while in the New, they are framed in terms of fulfillment. The individual covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David, as part of a larger covenantal structure, foreshadow the New Covenant ratified by the blood of Christ (Hebrews 10:11-18). The redemptive events found throughout the Old Testament are unintelligible apart from this covenantal structure and emphasis upon God's promise of a coming redeemer who as the seed of the woman is also the covenant mediator.⁷

As set forth in Articles Fourteen-Fifteen of the confession, as redemptive history begins to unfold, it is the first Adam—the biological and federal representative of all humanity—who fails to do as God has commanded under the terms of the covenant of works. This covenant of works—or as some Reformed writers speak of it, the “covenant of creation”—lies at the very heart of redemptive history.⁸ Under the terms of this covenant, God demands perfect obedience of Adam, who will either obey the terms of the covenant and receive God's blessing, eternal life in a glorified Eden, or else fail to keep the covenant and bring the covenant sanction down upon himself, and all those whom he represents. Adam's act of rebellion brings the curse of death upon the entire human race. This covenant of works is never subsequently abrogated in the Scriptures, a point empirically verified whenever death strikes. This covenant also undergirds the teaching of Scripture, which states that for any of Adam's fallen children to be saved, someone must fulfill all the terms of the covenant of works without so much as a single infraction, in thought, in word, or in deed (Matthew 5:48; 1 Peter 1:16).

Although some in our tradition contend that there is no such covenant between God and Adam because the phrase “covenant of works” does not explicitly appear in the biblical text, as we have seen, not only are all the elements of a covenant present in God's dealings with Adam, but the later biblical writers refer back to the account of Eden in precisely these terms. The prophet Hosea tells us that Israel will come under God's judgement, because “like Adam, they have broken my covenant.”⁹ In Romans 5:18-21, the perfect obedience required by this covenant is spelled out, in part, when Paul writes that sinners are declared righteous on the condition of Christ's obedience on their behalf. Here, the critical question is simply this: “Obedient to what?” Paul's answer is that Jesus Christ is perfectly obedient to that same covenant which the first Adam disobeyed. The resurrection is proof that Christ fulfilled the terms of this covenant, because after laying down his life for our sins, God raised him up, Lord of life (Romans 4:25).

Since Adam is the federal head of all men and women, once Adam disobeys the covenant of works, he

⁷ For classic statements of the Reformed conception of the covenants, see: Francis Turretin, Institutes of Elenctic Theology, trans., George Musgrave Giger, ed., James T. Dennison (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994), II.169-269; Herman Witsius, The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man, reprint ed., (Escondido, CA: den Dulk Foundation, 1990); and Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), 211 ff.

⁸ Meredith G. Kline, Kingdom Prologue (Overland Park, KS: Two Age Press, 2001), 10-14.

⁹ B. B. Warfield, “*Hosea VI.7: Adam or Man?*” in Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield, Vol. 1, ed., John E. Meeter (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1970), 116-129.

plunges the entire human race into the guilt and consequences of sin. Although the curse subjects all of humanity, as well as all of creation, to the bondage of the guilt and power of sin, God has decreed to redeem both his people and his world. From the very outset, then, the unfolding drama of redemption will be one in which God seeks to rescue men and women from the guilt of Adam's sin, as well as undo the consequences of Adam's act of rebellion upon all of creation. As Article Seventeen of our confession puts it, "God set out to seek man." We do not seek God, because we are sinful.

The very fact that God demands perfect obedience from his creatures, even from the beginning of the drama of redemption, necessitates the coming of a second Adam who will be obedient unto death (Philippians 2:8), and who will become "sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). The Adam's fall necessitates the coming of a redeemer, a redeemer who must fulfill the terms of the original covenant of works which Adam failed to keep. The redeemer must establish a covenant of grace in which God will deliver Adam's fallen children. Yet he must do so without sacrificing his justice to manifest his love for lost and fallen sinners. This is why the promised redeemer will die upon a cross, something beyond the realm of imagination for an Old Testament believer looking for a deliverer to come. This becomes all the more remarkable when we consider that when Jesus Christ dies upon the cross, he bears in his own body those very same covenant curses, which God showed Abram in Genesis 15 (cf. Galatians 3:13). The cross fulfills the words God spoke to Adam in the Garden. "*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.*"

When God placed Adam under the covenant of works, Adam failed to obey. Adam and his family were cast from Eden and never allowed to return. This recurring theme of God making a covenant, the subsequent disobedience of his people, the consequences of the covenant curse resulting his people being cast from the land of promise, resurfaces throughout in the drama of redemption. At Mount Sinai, God placed Israel under the law, epitomized by the Ten Commandments, in which were codified the prior requirements of the covenant of works. The commandments were written upon the heart by virtue of the fact that all of Adam's children bear God's divine image (Romans 2:13-15). But Israel, too, failed to keep God's law, which brought curse upon the people in the form of the curse sanction of being removed from the land.

In his forbearance, God sent his prophets to call his disobedient people to repentance. But Israel repeatedly showed contempt for God by increasing her sins and killing God's messengers. Like Adam, the nation came under God's covenant judgement and was cast from the land. This time, God's people were not cast from Eden. They were cast from Canaan, that very land which God promised to Abraham. Adam failed. Now Israel failed. A redeemer was still needed, who would fulfill the covenant of works. "*For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh*" (Romans 8:3).

All of this is important to keep in mind because the history of redemption is the progressive unfolding of a covenant of works and a covenant of grace throughout the whole of Scripture. These two covenants—the essence of what is known as covenant theology—will continue to resurface throughout both testaments. It is in the progressive development of these two covenants that the person of Jesus Christ—the only mediator between God and man and that redeemer promised throughout the whole Old Testament—is revealed. This is why Article Seventeen, which outlines the basic plan of salvation, is followed by Article Eighteen, which deals with the incarnation (the mediator of the covenant of grace).

This is why the coming redeemer is revealed as a second Adam. He is not only the covenant mediator,

but the one who, as the new representative of God's people, is also Lord over all creation. It is the second Adam who ushers in a new creation when he rises again from the dead that first Easter morning. Therefore, it is in the person and work of Jesus Christ, that the seemingly diverse themes of election, incarnation, covenant and new creation, fit perfectly together. When the second Adam justifies the many through his own perfect obedience, he does so in terms of the New and better covenant, a covenant in which God will declare sinners as righteous because of the merits of Jesus Christ and in which God fulfills all of the promises that he made to Adam and Abraham. As the Apostle Paul puts it in his second letter to the Corinthians, to participate in Christ's reconciling work is likewise to participate in the new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). This new creation—which is nothing less than a paradise glorified—is also that New Jerusalem, which John depicts as follows: “*No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads*” (Revelation 22:3-4). God will dwell with us as in Eden, only this time “*for ever and ever.*”

The connection between the new creation and the covenant of grace is important to keep in mind. The one who makes all things new, Jesus Christ, is also the mediator of the covenant of grace. Therefore, new creation and the covenant of grace are forever joined together in the person and work of Jesus Christ who has died for our sins and was raised for our justification. Once again, we are reminded that the basic panorama of redemptive history is creation, fall, and redemption. And creation, fall and redemption play themselves out in redemptive history in terms of God's dealing with his creatures in terms of the covenants of both testaments. As our fathers in the faith remind us, this is the very fabric of redemption.

But when our fathers in the faith point this out, they are only following our Lord's example. When the Risen Lord gave his unsuspecting disciples a Bible study while on the road to Emmaus, we read in Luke 24:25-27, that Jesus . . .

said to them, 'O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

That one in whom we are elect (Jesus), who serves the mediator of the covenant of grace, who makes us alive when we were dead in sin, tells his disciples that everything Moses and the prophets had to say from Genesis to Malachi was about him.

The confession gets it right. As soon as Adam sinned, God set out to find him, seeking Adam, who was now “trembling all over.” Having pronounced the curse upon Adam, Eve, and the Serpent, God preaches the gospel to Adam, and “comforted him, promising to give him his Son, ‘born of a woman,’ to crush the head of the serpent, and to make him blessed.”

What, do we say by way of application?

The application we are to draw from our confession is very clear. When Adam sinned and was trembling and in hiding, God did not annihilate him. Instead, God sought him out, comforting him with the promise of redemption in Jesus Christ. Let me put it yet another way. When Adam broke God's law, God preached the gospel to him. God set out to find him.

The same thing holds true for us. We all have sinned in Adam. We are all born guilty for Adam's sin,

we are all born with a fallen nature, with a will enslaved to sinful desires, with a darkened understanding. We are all fully deserving of God's wrath. And yet, God is wonderfully merciful. When we went astray, God sought us out. When we ran from his presence, he followed us, calling out "where are you?" When we were his enemies, he reconciled himself to us and us to him through the cross of Jesus Christ. When we broke his law, God ensured that someone would come to us and preach the gospel. When we tremble, God comforts us with the word of promise.

This is the point made in the confession. In Adam, we all fled in terror. But God sent his Son. As God sent out to find Adam, so too, God sets out to find us. For in Jesus Christ, God took a true human nature to himself. In Jesus Christ, God still calls out to us, "where are you?" May this be the day to say, "here I am."