

THOUGHTS ON SOVEREIGN GRACE AND REGENERATION

Some Tentative Explorations

Biblical Horizons Occasional Paper No. 32

by James B. Jordan

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The purpose of this paper is two-fold. First, I hope to dissolve some of the perceived problems with the “new” ideas at issue in presbyterian circles at the present time.¹ I write “dissolve” because my perception is that some of these perceived problems are not real, but arise only from language. For example, if those putting forth the “new” perspective are willing to speak of baptism as the “washing of regeneration,” this is only a problem if “regeneration” is defined a certain way. While I believe that there are some real differences between what some would call a “traditional” Presbyterian view and this “new” view, I also believe that many perceived differences are only matters of terminology.

Second, I want to take up the question of “regeneration” as it is commonly understood in Calvinistic circles since the time of the Synod of Dort. My thesis is that the Bible does not teach that some people receive incorruptible new hearts, that some people are as individuals “regenerated.” My thesis is that this language has been misunderstood, and that the doctrine is problematic at the very least, in that it locates perseverance not in the ongoing and mysterious wrestling of the Spirit but in a change in the being of those elected to heaven. I have not been able to resolve all the difficulties with my thesis, but there are enough problems with the traditional view that I believe the matter should be opened up for discussion. This paper is “Some Tentative Explorations,” and should be read as such. It is an invitation to converse, not an attempt to settle every detail.

A couple of caveats are necessary at the outset. First, this paper is not a defense of the writings and thought of Norman Shepherd. While I have great respect for Shepherd, from whom I learned a lot while in seminary, the arguments and ideas set forth here should not be ascribed to him. Much of what is found here, especially in the first section,

¹They aren't new. There was a long discussion of just this matter in the Netherlands in the 1930s and 1940s, and again at Westminster Theological Seminary in the late 1970s. The present cycle of discussion is the third round of the discussion in recent times.

agrees in the main with Shepherd's views and the tradition of which he is a part, particularly the ecclesiastical theology of the “Liberated” Reformed churches of the Netherlands and Canada. At the same time, however, Shepherd accepts the notion of regeneration that the second part of this paper attacks, and so nothing I have written in that area should be confused with his beliefs.²

The second caveat concerns the so-called “New Perspective on Paul,” or perhaps to be more precise, the “new perspective on Judaism at the time of Jesus and the Apostles.” Perhaps inevitably, concerns about this “new perspective” have become entwined in the minds of many with concerns about the “new” ecclesial theology this paper is concerned with.³ I am happy to confess that like many conservative Reformed theologians, I find much of value in the writings of Reformed exegetes like Jakob van Bruggen and N. T. Wright and in semi-evangelicals like James D. G. Dunn.⁴ I also find myself questioning some things and disagreeing with others. Yet it must be noted that both Wright and Dunn insist that nothing they have written about Pauline theology invalidates the *application* of Paul's teachings by the Protestant Reformers to the questions they faced in their day – quite the contrary: They maintain that their approach only strengthens what Luther and Calvin had to say. From my reading of Wright and Dunn, I believe that they are correct. All the same, whether these new approaches to Paul prove of lasting value or not, they are not particularly relevant to this paper.

In sum, I hope that what I have written here will be taken at face value, as an attempt to say a helpful word – not the last word by any means – on this topic. I hope *not* to be taken as writing in terms of some larger surreptitious agenda, or, heaven forbid, as part of some conspiracy!

What follows is exactly what the title of this essay proclaims it to be: some thoughts on these matters, some tentative explorations. Some thoughts are developed at greater length than others. They are offered only as an attempt to advance discussion among men of good will.

I. Predestination

To begin with, let me try to alleviate some perceived concerns. Neither I nor anyone I know denies what is said in the “Five Points of Calvinism” as these are directed against the errors of Arminianism.⁵ We know that God predestinates everything that

²Norman Shepherd, *The Call of Grace* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 2000), ch. 7.

³Both “new” approaches share a concern for ecclesial theology, and both are open to “redemptive-historical” ways of reading the Bible that differ somewhat from the Scholastic *ordo salutis* approach to certain passages.

⁴While Richard B. Gaffin has expressed concerns about some aspects of the work of N. T. Wright, his own writings are very similar. Writing within a Presbyterian context, Gaffin has devoted much attention to the relationship between a “redemptive-historical” approach to the text and the classical *ordo salutis* reading of many Pauline passages.

⁵I would challenge a few specific statements in the Canons of Dort, but given the length of the Canons, I suppose many would have minor differences with some statements in them. But I profess my agreement with the main doctrines they teach.

happens in history, because God created history as well as the cosmos, and thus “created” every event in time. We know that some people are going to go to heaven. Thus, we know that God has predestinated some people to go to heaven. The prooftexts for this need be no more than Genesis 1:1 and Jesus' statement to the penitent thief on the cross.⁶ Even if the Bible nowhere says anything further about it, this is enough.

Hence we can rightly speak of some people as “elect for heaven.” Against the Arminians, we can track down the implications of this truth, expanding this truth into the “five points.”⁷

But there is a “danger” in this. When any of us get caught up in a matter, we tend to overread and misread the Bible, seeing evidence for our position all over the place. We want lots of prooftexts. Let me give an example.

The early Church had to deal much with the two natures of Jesus Christ. The Biblical evidence is there,⁸ but the Church has overread and misread certain passages in the quest for proofs of this doctrine. For instance, when Mark 1:1 says that Jesus was the son of God, this does not refer to His eternal sonship, but to his kingship, for that is what “son of God” usually means in the Bible, and Jesus as New Davidic King is the overarching theme of Mark (as Jesus as New Mosaic Priest governs Matthew, and Jesus as New Prophet governs Luke). Similarly, Romans 1:3-4 was pressed into service as a proof for the two natures, but as John Murray points out in his commentary, the passage says that Jesus was *appointed* as Spirit-empowered king at His resurrection, and that's what “son of God” means in this passage.

Just so, Calvinists have a tendency to read every passage about “election” in terms of the “five points,” and often this is not obviously correct. “Elect” simply means “choose.” God elected David to be king. God elects people into His Church, but not all those elected into the Church are elected to persevere, elected to heaven. We have to look at each passage to see what it says.

Even if *no* passage of the Bible *ever* speaks directly about those elected to heaven, the doctrine is secure. (I think at least Matthew 24:24 & 31 use “chosen ones” for those who go to heaven, who are protected and harvested by the angels.)

Without taking anything away from the Synod of Dort, we can read the “five points” in an ecclesial way:

1. All men are totally estranged from God.
2. God sovereignly before the foundation of the world has unconditionally elected some people to be baptized into His Church.⁹

⁶The doctrine of creation, Genesis 1:1, means God created all of space and time, which has to mean that He “created” every event in time. God created all of history. If we say that God did not “create” (i.e., predestinate) every event in time, we have a limited God who is not really a creator at all, but only a manipulator of a space-time cosmos that already existed.

⁷Here again, it would be insane to insist that the Canons of Dort trace out these implications perfectly. To say this would be to deny the ongoing growth in understanding of the Church. I believe, however, that Dort does trace them out adequately, though there is doubtless more to be said.

⁸Jesus was clearly a man, and Jesus accepted worship from Thomas as God, worship rejected by the angel in Revelation 22:8-9.

⁹Throughout this paper I shall speak of baptism as the event by which God places people into the Church and into union with Christ. I write this way because the Bible speaks this way.

3. Jesus' atoning work is truly given to such people in a special way, a way that goes beyond the general benefits of the atonement that are given to all men while they live in this present world.¹⁰

4. Such people are irresistibly drawn into the Church. Consider a squalling infant who is being baptized: He can fight all he wants, but the grace – baptism is a means of grace according to Reformed theology – is irresistibly given to him.

5. Those thus elected into the Church are set on a road to heaven, and some will persevere because God continues to work with them until the end.

I hope it can be granted that to speak in this ecclesial (“covenantal”) way does not take anything away from the teachings of Dort, though it may force a modification of some statements in the Canons. Calvinists say that the God who decreed the ends also decreed the means to those ends. A “five points of election into the Church” is simply the means God uses to accomplish the “five points of election to heaven.”

Now, I've not argued for these “five ecclesial points.” I've only set them out. Whether they are accurate or not – whether they prove Biblically sound or not – is a matter for exegesis and theological reflection at another level. My point is that those speaking this way pose no threat to historic Calvinistic teaching about predestination.

Let me now turn to a couple of Bible passages, which are familiar enough not to need citation: 1 Corinthians 1 and Ephesians 1. These passages are addressed to whole churches, and speak of election before the foundation of the world, saints by calling, sanctified in Christ, redeemed, forgiven, adopted, predestined, etc. But what does Paul mean by this language?

1. Is he addressing a secret “invisible church” inside the Corinthian and Ephesian churches?

2. Is he addressing the “visible church” but speaking by metonymy, speaking to them all *as if* they were part of the “invisible church”?

3. Does Paul have some insight into the decree, so that he knows that all these people are elect for heaven?

4. Or is Paul saying that all these people, all of them, were baptized into the Church because God elected them for this privilege from the foundation of the world, and all of them were called and sanctified, etc., in Christ? That is, they have been elected into the Church, into union with Christ, but now must make their calling and election sure by persevering, not wandering away and disuniting from Christ.

Now this is just a matter of exegesis. I perceive no threat to Reformed doctrine in any of these positions. We know that some are elected to persevere. The question is whether Paul is somehow speaking to and about these people, or whether he is speaking to and about those elected into the covenant community, people who might apostatize if they don't make their calling and election sure.

I am personally convinced of the ecclesial interpretation of these passages. I believe that to say that “elect” always means “chosen to heaven” creates huge pastoral

Baptism is the event associated with the transition from wrath to grace. I am not denying at all that pre-baptized converts are already, perhaps in a preliminary way, placed “in Christ,” and I am certainly not denying salvation to everyone who does not live to be baptized, such as infants who die before baptism. But baptism is official the marker, and in this paper I shall speak of it in that way. Acts 2:38; 22:16; 1 Corinthians 6:11; Ephesians 5:26; Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 3:21; etc.

¹⁰See “A Final Note on the Atonement” at the end of this paper.

problems in the churches. People don't know, because they can't know, whether these promises apply to them or not. History shows that this problem is real.

The ecclesial view, however, can say to all baptized persons: “I don't know if you will persevere or not, but I know this: God has chosen you before the foundation of the world. God has given you every benefit in Christ. God has promised that His Spirit will wrestle with you and preserve you – if you want Him to do so. You are on the road to heaven. But know this also: God will honor you as a human being made in His very image, and if you insist on departing, God's Spirit will not always strive with you. You can grieve Him. You can get off the way to heaven. You can lose all these benefits, if you really want to forsake them. Yet be assured, that's not what God wants for you. He baptized you and has made Himself your God and Father. So make your calling and election sure by continuing to be faithful to Him.”

Now, we know that behind all this is the predestinating plan of God. Those who leave the Way and are damned were predestinated to this end. But at the same time our fathers warn us in the Westminster Confession that this truth must be handled with care, and Paul in Romans 9 rebukes those who try to play God and think from His eternal perspective about things. If people get to worrying and ask how they can know they will persevere, they have to be rebuked for the sin of trying to play God, as Paul does in Romans 9. They are sinning by trying to live by insight into the future, by insight into the decree, rather than living by faith in God and His promises alone. God has given them grace, *the same grace (favor) as He has given to every baptized person*,¹¹ and He has given them His promise and His Spirit. There is no more He can give them than Himself, and He has done so.

Now once again, I have *not* argued for this position exegetically. I'm simply trying to show that this “new” position is no threat to the doctrine of predestination, and I have argued that this position is pastorally more attractive than what we often hear.

If we can agree that there is no *fundamental* threat to Reformed doctrine in this “ecclesial” position, then we can roll up our sleeves and look at some arguably *secondary* matters in the Reformed tradition that this position calls into question. To that we now must turn.

II. Is There a “Church Within the Church”?

There are several interlocked exegetical-theological matters that are meshed into this whole discussion. I only want to address one of them, and that is this: Does the Bible teach that somehow hidden within the “visible” Church, within the “external” covenant, there is a group of people who are “truly regenerate” and who because of this will not fall away? That is to say, does God give some people in the Church *at the beginning point* (baptism; conversion) a “full” experience of His grace, and to the other people only a “partial” experience?

The question here concerns the *beginning point*. If we ask about the whole course of a baptized person's life, it is clear that the Spirit wrestles more fully with some than with others, and only some persevere. In that sense, we could speak of “full” versus “partial.” The question before us, however, is whether God gives some people “more” at the starting line than He gives others, so that only those who receive the “more” persevere

¹¹That is, baptism is not a guarantee of perseverance. Baptism gives every baptizand the same starting point, I shall argue, but does not guarantee every baptizand the same final ending.

to the end; or whether God gives the same thing (Himself) to all, but continues to wrestle to the end only with some, so that some fall away while others persevere.

There are indeed a number of passages of the Bible that have been read as teaching this distinction of starting points. Passages in the first epistle of John have been read as teaching that some who were in the Church, and then departed, were never really in the Church at all. Paul's statements in Romans 2:28-29 and 9:6 have been read as saying that those who are Jews "inwardly" are "truly regenerate" while those who are only Jews "outwardly," who are not truly "of Israel," are not "truly regenerate."

My thesis is that these and other passages, to be addressed below, have been either misread (that is, they are not concerned with this question) or overread (that is, they have been pressed out of context to say more than they really say). The thesis of this paper is that all who are in Christ are in exactly the same position as regards the grace (favor) and gifts of God, with no distinction save that some continue in that position while others depart from it. Those passages that traditionally are held to teach that apostates never really were in Christ all along have been misinterpreted, and there are in fact no such passages in the Bible.

Or to put it more bluntly, my thesis is that there is no such thing as "regeneration" in the sense in which Reformed theology since Dort has spoken of it. The Bible says nothing about a permanent change in the hearts of those elected to heaven. All the passages that have been read as teaching such a notion have been misread. What the Bible says is that God calls some people to Himself and by His Spirit wrestles with them. The Spirit preserves those elected to heaven from falling away.

To be sure, the Bible speaks of the hearts of men. It speaks of hard hearts. It tells us to circumcise our hearts (and please notice that it is *we* who are to circumcise our hearts; these passages have nothing to do with the supposed doctrine of sovereign heart-regeneration by the Spirit). But it also tells us that only God knows the heart. When and how and to what degree and in what respect God may change the hearts of people is His business.

Of course, if the Bible actually teaches that God makes a permanent change in the hearts of some people, those elected to heaven, then it is still God's business and not ours. We must still live by what is given to us, the promises, and not try to inspect our hearts to see if they are "truly regenerate" or not. Yet, if the Bible teaches that God permanently "regenerates" the hearts of those elected to heaven, it seems to follow that all the promises and gifts of salvation are really only for those people, and there is something deceptive about God's offering them to others, and deceptive about the Bible's speaking to everyone in the Church as if they had been given these promises and gifts.

Hence my position: Everyone who is baptized has been given the same thing. No one has been given a permanently changed "regenerated" heart. Everyone alike has been drawn into personal fellowship with God and has been placed in union with Christ. These gifts and promises are truly given to all. Perseverance is a matter of the Spirit's mysterious wrestling work, and not a matter of whether a person has a permanently changed heart or not.

I wish to make a case for this thesis. I am not saying that I regard this thesis as certain. Rather, at the present time I believe this thesis to be correct. It may not be so. Or, it may be that the thesis is inadequately expressed or qualified in this present paper; in fact I'm confident that more needs to be said. My purpose in setting forth this thesis is to advance the present discussion, not to end it.

That said, I need to make an immediate qualification to the thesis. To repeat the thesis: All who are in Christ are in exactly the same position as regards the grace (favor) and gifts of God, with no distinction save that some continue in that position while others

depart from it. The qualification is this: I am speaking of what is objectively given to those in Christ, not about the various ways in which people subjectively receive what has been given. To wit:

1. It is possible to be given a gift and never open or use it.
2. It is possible to be given a gift and abuse it.
3. It is possible to be given a gift and use it truly and properly, but later on to set it aside and forsake it.
4. It is possible to be given a gift and use it for the rest of one's life.

That is to say:

1. A child can be brought for baptism, and by baptism God truly gives that child everything any other baptized child is given. But that child may never be brought to church again, and may grow up as a complete heathen and never make any use of what God truly gave him.

2. A child may receive the gift of God by baptism, but grow up to abuse that gift by merely going through the motions of being a Christian, or by rejecting true doctrine and worship, or in other ways.

3. A child may receive the gift of God by baptism and have a true and lively faith in God for a time, but fall away and perish in the end.

4. A child may receive the gift of God by baptism, and place his faith in God and continue in that faith until the end.

The gift is God Himself: union with Christ and fellowship with the Father and the Spirit. God really and truly gives Himself to all those baptized (and to those who are converted but not yet baptized, by anticipation). God objectively declares such people justified (forgiven), sanctified (counted as holy), and glorified (adopted as sons).

What I am disputing is the notion that a guarantee of perseverance is an aspect of this gift. I am disputing the notion that those who don't persevere were never *really* given the gift. If we make perseverance, or even a response of faith, part of this objective gift, we immediately run afoul of many passages of the Bible that teach that God offers Himself to all men, and truly gives Himself to all who are baptized into the Church. To take but one example: Jesus says (John 15) that to be in the "true vine" is to be in union with Him. What *more* can there be than union with Christ? But Jesus also warns that we must abide in the vine, and not depart from Him.

Hence my thesis, as qualified, is that God gives exactly the same thing, Himself, to all baptized persons, but that the Spirit orders the lives of various such persons differently. What God objectively bestows is one thing; how God's Spirit causes each person to respond is another.

To amplify: The gift to the Church is God Himself, the Triune God. In the Godhead, the Father is giving the gift of a Bride to His Son, and the Son is giving the gift of a people to His Father. It is the Spirit who is proceeding from the Father and from the Son to bring these gifts. To be baptized is to be woven into this process, to be incorporated into the Bride/people. But not everyone woven into this process, not everyone placed "in Christ," is destined to persevere to the end. The Spirit's work is mysterious. The Spirit wrestles to bring the Bride to the Son and the people to the Father. He wrestles in history and over the course of time, throughout the biographies of individuals and the histories of cultures. The Spirit will not always strive with sinners (Genesis 6:3). He can be grieved and quenched. He can forsake Saul. Not until the gifts are finally given to the Son and Father, at the end, will the gifts be fully prepared. Not all those who start out as part of these gifts will be part of them at the end.

This position locates perseverance in the ongoing interaction of the person with the Spirit, not in some special benefit given in connection with baptism to some baptizands

and not to others (or to “true converts” and not to “temporary converts”). Classical Calvinism, however, has argued that a “new birth,” a “new heart,” a “regeneration” is an aspect of the objective gift itself, and that anyone who receives this “new heart” will persevere.¹² Hence, only those who are “regenerated” were *really* given the gift of being in union with Christ. Therefore, I begin by taking up the question of “regeneration” and the “new birth.”

Regeneration

As is often pointed out, words in dogmatic theology do not have exactly the same meaning as the Biblical words that correspond to them. As regards “regeneration,” the meaning of this term in Reformed theology bears virtually no resemblance to its meaning in the Bible. “Regeneration” in the Bible is used only in Matthew 19:27-30, where it refers to the New Creation that Jesus has come to establish. In the “regeneration,” and specifically the Apostolic Age, the disciples who have left everything will rule the twelve tribes, ministering to them as true servant-kings until the end of the old age in AD 70 (cf. James 1:1; 1 Peter 1:1). Titus 3:5 associates baptism with entry into this new creation, into “regeneration.” Thus, in the Bible, “regeneration” denotes the new historical epoch inaugurated at Pentecost, and is a synonym of “New Creation.”

In dogmatic Reformed theology, especially after the Arminian controversy, “regeneration” came to be used for an inner work of grace in the heart of a person, which enables him to turn to God in saving faith. This is how Murray uses the term in his work *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*.¹³ To his discussion we shortly turn.

Before turning to the topic more focally, however, I should like to raise a question about the whole matter of an “inward” call and “inward” response, because it seems to me that in the background of this whole theological discussion is a questionable premise. If I call out your name in a room full of people, you will hear it in spite of all the noise, and you will turn and face me. You may turn away if you don't like me, but you will turn. Similarly, if we are at a church supper and I call out “dinner is ready,” people will hear this and will move to the tables.

These are fully “effectual” calls, but there is nothing “internal” about them. We don't say that a man's heart has to be transformed in some mystical manner before he turns to face the person calling his name. Why, then, do we say this about the call of God? That call from God is uttered aloud by men and consists of vibrations in the air that strike the eardrums of other people. People hear the call; they cannot do otherwise unless they are deaf.

¹²Dort confusingly manages to say both. Speaking of sins committed by Christians, Canon 5:7 says, “For in the first place, in these falls He preserves in them the incorruptible seed of regeneration from perishing or being totally lost; and again, by His Word and Spirit He certainly and effectually renews them to repentance . . .” I agree that God actively works with those whom He has elected to heaven, to renew them when they sin and preserve them from fully falling away. But what is this *incorruptible* seed that needs to be kept from *perishing*? It does not seem to have occurred to the authors that this statement is contradictory. If this supposed seed is incorruptible, then it *cannot* perish by definition!

¹³(Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1955), pp. 95ff. It is also how Norman Shepherd defines it in *Call of Grace*, p. 93. For others in the Reformed tradition, notably Calvin himself, “regeneration” refers to the new life that a justified person enters as a result of his salvation. This notion is much closer to the Biblical meaning of the term.

Why do some respond with joy while others turn away? Because the Spirit of God works differently with different people. Murray raises the question this way: “How can a person who is dead in trespasses and sins, whose mind is enmity against God, and who cannot do that which is well-pleasing to God answer a call to the fellowship of Christ?” (p. 95). To this question we can give a very simple answer: because the Spirit of God causes him to respond favorably. There is no *prima facie* need to posit some prior “internal change” that is the basis of this favorable response.

Murray might respond, “Yes, but the man is dead in trespasses and sins. A dead person cannot hear anything unless first he is made alive.” To this I reply that such a response confuses analogy with reality. The person is in fact *not* dead. He is alive. He can hear and respond, and he in fact *does* hear and respond either positively or negatively. “Dead in trespasses and sins” is not a metaphysical statement, but is a way of saying that the man is personally estranged from God. The man does not need to be “made alive” in any metaphysical sense, but rather he needs to enter into personal fellowship with God. The “new life” that he needs is not metaphysical but relational.

Murray, however, can respond, “Yes, but there are passages in the Bible that speak of a new birth, of a changed heart, and these support the notion of an inward regeneration that is necessary before a person can respond in saving faith.” And indeed, there are passages that can be and very often have been read along these lines. The remainder of this paper is devoted to a consideration of them.

At the outset, though, we should consider that a “new birth” or “re-generation,” conceived metaphysically, does not necessarily carry with it the notion of perseverance to the end. The language refers to a new beginning, not to a final end. The same is true of language surrounding adoption. Consider that I adopt a child and give him my name, so that he enters into a new life, with new friends, new songs, possibly a new language if I adopted him from China, etc. But he may grow up and throw off my name and reject the new life and world I've provided him. Hence, it is clear that the gift of a new beginning does not carry with it a guarantee of continuance in the new life. Since this is how adoption works in the life of the images of God (human life), what reason do we have for thinking that things are quite otherwise when God Himself adopts?¹⁴

Of course, that is the question we need to consider: Does the Bible teach that all who enter into the new life are predestined to continue in that life to the end? That some continue is quite clear. That everything is in God's predestinating plan is clear. But what is that plan? Is it God's plan that all who receive a (metaphysical) new birth will also continue to the end? Or is it God's plan that some who receive such a new birth will fall away and be damned?

If we conceive of this new birth as a metaphysical change, it does become possible to think that anyone receiving it *must* persevere, because he or she has become a different kind of human being. Yet, as I have just pointed out, even a metaphysical “new birth” does not necessarily imply continuance in the new life to the end. If, however, the new birth is entrance into a new *relationship* with God, it is clear that a person loses his new life if he apostatizes from that relationship with God.

Murray makes much of Romans 8:28-30, which states that those who are justified are also glorified. But Murray defines glorification eschatologically (p. 174), even though

¹⁴The same is true of justification, forgiveness. If a man steals and then pays his dues to society, and then steals again, do we not take his first crime into account when punishing the second crime? Isn't his punishment more severe? Jesus makes the same point in the Parable of the Wicked Servant, who nullified his initial justification by evil actions.

the term in Romans 8 is in the same past tense as all the rest. From this Murray and his tradition can argue that all who are *really* predestined, called, and justified will also come to the end of glorification (p. 157). Such a reading, however, assumes what it must demonstrate, that “glory” is something only found in the eschaton. And this is manifestly not the case (2 Corinthians 3:18): To be in Christ is to be united to the glorified Jesus Christ, and thus to be glorified *now*, growing from glory to glory. Throughout Romans 8, Paul has been discussing the present as well as the future glorification of believers by the Spirit, in that the Spirit is associated with glory throughout the Bible, and in that adoption is precisely the glorious privilege of being sons of the Supreme King. “Glorification” is not a technical term referring to the eschatological estate of believers, but is an *aspect* of salvation, along with justification and sanctification. Like sanctification, glorification is definitive, progressive, and culminative.

With this in mind, it is perfectly possible to take Paul's statement in an ecclesial sense: God has foreknown and predestined certain people to be called into His Church/covenant, and has granted them justification and glorification in Christ. This gift has been given. But Paul does not say that all who receive this gift will continue in it. They *should* continue in it. God *wants* them to continue in it. But God may not have decreed that all of them continue in these blessings. They might fall away, which is why the epistles, especially the epistle to the Hebrews, abound in encouragements to persevere.

In no way does such an understanding threaten the Reformed faith. It only “threatens” one version of the *ordo salutis*, and is problematic only if we insist that this version of the *ordo* is a *sine qua non* of the Reformed faith.

Murray's position is that God's grace changes the hearts of some people in such a way that they cannot fall from salvation. Such people are united to Christ and will persevere to the end. Those who come into the Church for a time and then fall away never had this change of heart, and this is why they do not persevere; they receive grace only partially (p. 153).

The alternative position can be summarized this way: God effectually calls some people into union with Christ. Those united to Christ receive a new heart, which is Christ Himself, the Heart of the Kingdom. They receive an imperishable Seed, which is Christ Himself, the Seed of the woman; and an incorruptable Root, which is Christ Himself, the Root of Jesse. Some people receive this new Christ-Heart/Seed/Root temporarily, while others are predestined to persevere. Those who eventually separate themselves from Christ perforce lose their new Heart/Seed/Root, and perish. But during the time that they were in Christ they were as much in Christ as those predestined to persevere to the end.

The danger of Murray's position is that it makes perseverance dependent, functionally, on an infusion of “grace” into the “heart” of the “elect.” I submit that protestants should be wary of any such notion of “grace.” But note what Murray writes on p. 93: “And surely union with Christ is that which unites us to the inwardly operative grace of God. Regeneration is the beginning of inwardly operative saving grace.” I don't see how this notion of “grace” fits with the proper definition of “grace” as “favor.” Murray surely seems to be operating with a notion of “grace” as “power,” a power infused inwardly into a person. By implication, saving faith is an outgrowth of infused power-grace; or to put it bluntly, justifying faith emerges from a change in the person, not the other way around. Do we really want to say that God first changes us and then justifies us? Maybe, but at the very least, such a notion should put protestants on guard.

We turn first of all to passages adduced by Murray as teaching a “divine impartation” to the “heart” of the individual believer that changes him in such a way that he cannot fall away from grace, an impartation that mere temporary Christians do not receive.

In his chapter on “Regeneration” (pp. 95ff.) and in thematic anticipations in previous chapters, Murray alludes to or discusses three passages of the Bible: Ezekiel 36, John 3, and the first epistle of John. In none of these does Murray discuss alternative ways of reading the text. For him, evidently, these passages are clear and there is one obvious and inescapable way of reading them.

Ezekiel 36

Murray only briefly mentions Ezekiel 36:25-27 (cf. Ezk. 11:19-20), but we shall consider it at greater length because of the way it anticipates John 3:

Then I will sprinkle clean water on you,
And you will be clean;
I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.
Moreover, I will give you a new heart
And put a new Spirit within you;
And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh,
And give you a heart of flesh.
And I will put My Spirit within you
And cause you to walk in My statutes,
And you will be careful to observe Mine ordinances.

Let us begin by noting that this promise does not include a promise that all who receive these blessings will persevere in them to the end. Assuming that the stony heart is an apostate heart, and that the new heart is a converted heart, nothing here says that every person given this new heart will persevere to the end. Indeed, the one person who is expressly said to have been given a new heart is King Saul (1 Samuel 10:9), but though Saul received the Spirit and a new heart, he eventually drove the Spirit from him and perished.

There is, however, a good reason for not reading Yahweh's promise along these exclusively psychological lines. Traditionally, reading psychologically, the “stone” heart has been linked with the “hard” heart of men in rebellion against God. I submit that the “heart of stone” refers rather to the tablets of the law enshrined in the Holy of Holies, and that the coming “heart of flesh” refers to the Incarnate Word, the New Heart of God's people and of His kingdom.

To begin with, we note that this is a predicted change in history that will accompany the return from exile, as is clear from the context. Are we to believe that Abraham and Moses and David did not have “regenerate” hearts? Did they have some kind of evil stony hearts? Obviously not, and this is duly discussed by those who read the passage psychologically. They say, for instance, that the promised future new heart is but a fuller form of what the true saints of God had possessed all along. For reasons to be set out below, I do not believe that this explanation does full justice to the passage.

Rather, the fact that Yahweh is predicting a change in redemptive history points us to the meaning of “heart” in this passage. The heart of stone is not a hard or petrified heart inside individual human beings, but refers to the Word Made Stone, the Ten Words, in the Most Holy of the Tabernacle/Temple. This is indeed exactly how Paul takes it in 2 Corinthians 3. Any ancient person knew that Temples were simultaneously microcosmic models of the universe, of human society, and of the human person. If by the time of Jesus men had begun to forget this symbolism, Paul reminds us of it in 1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19; 2 Corinthians 6:16; and other passages. Ezekiel was a priest, and the book of Ezekiel is written throughout in terms of Temple and sacrificial imagery.

The Most Holy is the head and heart of the Temple Person and Temple Society. In the Most Holy, in the Ark, was the Word Made Stone (Ex. 24:12; Dt. 5:22). At Sinai, the Word became Stone, and dwelt among us, and we beheld God's glory at Sinai, having grace ("I redeemed you from Egypt") and truth (the commandments). The Psalmist celebrates God as the Rock who dwells in the midst of Israel. The Heart of Stone is solid and secure. Indeed, from Exodus 33-34 it appears that the Heart of Stone was cut out from the very Rock that hid Moses from the wrath of God. What could be better than the firmness and protection of the Word Made Stone?

Only the incarnate Word Made Flesh, who will bring the Spirit in fullness.

We should note that both in Ezekiel 11:16-21 and 36:24-28, Yahweh is predicting a new exodus, this time out of the nations into which Israel had been driven. At the first great exodus, from Egypt under Moses, Yahweh had instituted sprinkling rites for cleansing, which in the wilderness meant using water that came from the Rock; now a greater cleansing of water is predicted, using water from the Incarnate Word. At the first exodus, they were given a Heart of Stone at the center of their lives; now a more wonderful Heart of Flesh is predicted. The Spirit came upon Moses and the elders at the first exodus, but now a greater outpouring of the Spirit is prophesied. These exodus analogies only reinforce the thesis that the Heart of Stone is not a hard heart of unbelief, but the earlier and provisional heart of the earlier and provisional form of the Kingdom of God.

In agreement with this typology, the Temple was built of stones (1 Kings 5-7) with the Tablets of Stone at its heart (1 Kings 8:9). The new Temple is built of "living stone," and consists of human "words" or "letters" who are not individual "tablets of stone" but "tablets of hearts of flesh" (2 Cor. 3:3 & 7). Back when Yahweh was the Rock of Israel, and His word was solidly given in stony tablets, the people were also stones in His Temple. Now that Yahweh has become incarnate, He has become the Heart of Flesh for His people, and they too are fleshly and living stones in His people-Temple.

I hope that the reader is persuaded from this discussion that Ezekiel 36 is not speaking of "regeneration" as part of personal salvation from God's wrath, a change in the being of the individual. Rather, the new order spoken of in Ezekiel 36 is indeed "regeneration," but in the Biblical sense: the New Creation. The new heart of this new creation is not a changed human "nature," but is the incarnate Word of God at the heart of society and of individual. Any individual and any church and any nation that abides in union with the New Heart will receive the benefits and blessings of The Regeneration. Anyone who rejects the New Heart, or who turns away after receiving Him, will lose those benefits and blessings.

In short, this passage is not about a change in the *metaphysics of human nature*, but is about a new and more glorious *personal relationship with God*, who is the Heart of human life.

John 3

When Murray passes from Ezekiel 36 to John 3 he makes the same mistakes. He assumes that Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus is a conversation with an unbeliever about personal salvation. For Murray, John 3 is "familiar words, but how frequently their most obvious meaning is ignored or distorted" (p. 96). For Murray, the new birth being spoken of is personal salvation, and the kingdom of God is the realm of salvation, not the coming new age.

John 3, however, is not about how to be saved from hell. Nicodemus is not an "unregenerate" man in need of rescue. He is a believer who is seeking to learn about the new kingdom that Jesus is announcing. That kingdom is not the realm of personal

salvation but the new creation, though in the future all those who find salvation will have to find it in this new creation, for the old creation will pass away.

A new birth of water and the Spirit stands in contrast to the birth of Adam of dust and Spirit. Adam's first-creation birth was dry; the new creation is watery. Adam came up from the dust; the new creation comes down from the "waters above the firmament." To be "born again" is to be "born from above." As Paul puts it, "the first man is from the earth, made of dust; the second man is from heaven" (1 Corinthians 15:47).

Entrance into the New Creation, thus, is what John 3 is about. That entrance is by baptism, "water baptism." Murray tries to avoid seeing Christian baptism in this passage (p. 97), calling attention to the baptisms of the Law, which were for purification. Murray overlooks the fact that the entire gospel of John was addressed to the Church, and the Church would hardly have overlooked the reference to baptism. Moreover, immediately after this conversation with Nicodemus, the gospel returns to the subject of baptism (John 3:22ff.). Finally, while purification is an important aspect of Old Creation baptisms, it is not the sole meaning of them. They also symbolized quickening and provided a temporary resurrection to life.

Murray takes "born of the Spirit" in John 3:5-6 as a term signifying personal "regeneration." Again, that is not Jesus' meaning. Rather, Spiritual birth is birth into the New Creation. It is not a matter of an internal change in the individual, but the movement of the whole individual (and/or culture) into the new sphere of the Spirit in the new age that dawned on Pentecost in Acts 2. In this sense, neither Abraham nor Moses nor David nor Nicodemus had been "born of the Spirit," but for Nicodemus there was the possibility of receiving this new birth, this birth from above, and entering into the New Kingdom. And, once that New Kingdom had come, there would no longer be any possibility of personal salvation outside of it.

Along these lines, notice that "you must be born from above" (v. 7) is addressed in the plural. Jesus is saying that Israel must enter into The Regeneration. He has also called Nicodemus as an individual to make this transition, to be born from above. Yet, even here, Jesus addresses Nicodemus as the representative of Israel, as "*the* teacher of Israel" (v. 10). Jesus' language harkens back to Ezekiel 36, as Murray plainly sees, but as Murray fails to see, this language in both places is not about a taxonomy of personal conversion to faith in God, but is about the coming of the New Creation in history.

Jesus said that John the Baptist was the greatest of the old creation prophets, but that the least in the new kingdom of heaven would be greater than John (Matthew 11:11). Did John live to see the new birth? No. Did John experience the new birth? No. Was John "in The Regeneration"? No. For John died before the outpouring the Spirit on Pentecost recorded in Acts 2.

Was Nicodemus a saved, believing man before he met Jesus? Yes. Was Nicodemus on the road to heaven? Yes. Did Nicodemus need to be born again, born from above, if he was going to enter the new kingdom? Yes.

Jesus in John 3 is not providing *ordo* of individual salvation. He is not discussing how an individual person comes to have a saving relationship with God. Rather, He is discussing the arrival of salvation in history at that time, a salvation that would bring with a whole new order of existence for God's people.

The First Epistle of John

The third section of the Bible that Murray brings up in support of his position is the first letter of John. We now turn our attention to that book, beginning with 1 John 3:9:

All who are born/begotten of God do not practise sin, because His seed (Seed) abides in him, and he (He) cannot sin because he (He) is born/begotten of God.

Murray makes a big deal out of this, that people “truly born again” cannot sin, i.e., cannot make a continual practice of sin. He writes: “He does not sin because God's seed abides in him. Now this abiding seed alludes clearly to the divine impartation which took place in the divine begetting. It is this divine begetting with its abiding consequence that is the cause of not doing sin. Hence regeneration is logically and causally prior to the not doing sin. And again, John tells us that ‘he cannot sin because he is begotten of God,’ an express statement that regeneration is the cause why this person cannot sin” (p. 101).

What Murray misses is that the Seed is Jesus (Gen. 3:15), not an inner changed nature brought about by an infusion of some sort of power-grace.¹⁵ The believer does not practise sin because the Seed of God (Jesus) abides in him, and Jesus cannot sin because Jesus is born/begotten of God. The Seed is the sinless Only-begotten who abides in all those born/begotten of God.

Contrary to Murray, John has just said (3:6a): “All who abide in Him do not [practise] sin”. The “abiding” is mutual: We abide in Him, and He (as Seed) abides in us. While this continues, we cannot “sin.” But clearly, if we stop abiding in Him, then He no longer abides in us as preserving Seed and convicting Word either. The Seed/Word departs and we are no longer “born of God.” We lose our new birth; that is, we pass out of the realm in which the new birth and life operates.

Seemingly more difficult is 3:6b: “All who [practise] sin have not seen Him and have not known Him.” It looks as if John is back-dating the sinners: Those in the Church who practise sin have never come to know Him. Even when we identify the Seed as Jesus rather than an infusion of power-grace that changes our own natures, it appears John is saying that some baptized people never received that Seed. John does *not* write: “All who [practise] sin have departed from Him and no longer know Him.”

This seems to contradict the many apostasy passages in the NT, which say that those who come into Christ can fall away. John seems to be saying that backsliding apostates never were in Christ at all.

Before addressing this problem, let us look at 1 John 2:19, which will provide important insights. Here is a common translation:

From us they went out, for they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but [they went out] that it might be made manifest that they all are not of us.

The usual interpretation is that these are apostates who never *really* were part of the Church, and that's why they apostatized. There is, however, good reason not to read the text this way, because in context John is not writing about people who apostatized from the faith but about false teachers who go out on evil missionary trips.

A more careful translation helps. Repeatedly the preposition “ex” is used here, and a more wooden translation looks something like this:

¹⁵The Canons of Dort make the same mistake in Canon 5, Rejection of Errors 8, when they cite 1 Peter 1:23, “Having been begotten again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptable.” They assume this means that people who have been born again have been implanted with some abstract “incorruptible seed” which means they can never fall away. The Seed, however, is Jesus Christ, and if men cease to abide in Him, then He as Incorruptible Seed will no longer be with them.

Out from us they went out,
 But they were not out from us,
 For if they were out from us they would have remained with us,
 But [this happened] in order that they might be manifest that none of
 them are out from us.

The usual translation sees a play on “out from us” and “of us,” both translations of *ex hemoon*. I suggest that “out from us” is correct in all places.

Notice that these are not just apostates in general, but from v. 18, they are antichrists, false teachers. 2 John 7 says that deceivers have gone out into the world, and that these are antichrists. The same is said by 1 John 4:1-3. The Pauline epistles speak of false teachers who claimed to have been sent out from true churches, particularly from the Jerusalem church(es). Jesus warned of them in Matthew 24.¹⁶

Thus, it is the notion of being sent out as apostles/prophets/evangelists that is in view here in 1 John 2:19. The antichrists have gone out into the world, out “from us,” claiming to have been sent by the Johannine church. Note that since Peter, James, and John were apostles to the circumcision, this church might well be Judean/Jerusalemite, and those falsely claiming to have been sent are the same general group Paul encountered.

On this more precise and contextual reading, the passage has nothing to do with the question of whether these men were formerly part “of us.” Rather, it has to do with whether they had been sent out “by us.”

“Out from us they went out,” – that is, they set out on teaching missions.

“But they were not out from us,” – that is, they had no valid commission from us.

“For if they were out from us they would have remained with us,” – that is, if they had valid commissions from us, they would have remained with us in our true teaching.

“But [this happened] in order that they might be manifest that none of them are out from us.” – that is, their false teaching shows that they were not sent by us.¹⁷

This discussion has gotten us into the context of the epistle. Let us now return to 1 John 3:6b, which says that those who practise sin have never seen Him and have never known Him. I submit that these people are not apostate Christians in general, but are specifically the false teachers, the antichrists. This follows from the use of “see” in 1 John.

John begins by thrice declaring that he himself has seen Him (1 John 1:1-3). Later on he says that the people to whom he writes have not seen God, but that they will if they persevere (3:2; 4:20). Here in 3:6b, he refers to men who claim to have seen Him and to

¹⁶Indeed, the whole first epistle of John is an exposition of Jesus' warnings in Matthew 24:10-13 & 23-24 about false prophets who would arise and mislead many.

¹⁷Note the [this happened]. There is no word here, and something has to be supplied from context. Usually what is supplied is the notion of departure: “But [they went out] in order to manifest that none of them are of us,” meaning that their apostasy showed that they were not true believers all along. This is not an accurate understanding of the text, however. It is not their departure which shows that they are not “of us,” but their false teaching that which shows that they were not “sent out by us.”

have known Him, but who never did. He follows immediately by warning against false teachers: “Little children, let no one deceive you” (3:7a).¹⁸

In sum, the whole epistle of 1 John is written to strengthen the faith of the believers in the face of false teachers. These false teachers are those who have “gone out” as if they had been sent by the apostles. They are liars. They claim to have seen and known Jesus during His life, but even if they glimpsed Him from afar, they never really saw or knew Him.

Against Murray, then, those passages in 1 John that he takes as indicating that apostate Christians were never “regenerate” are in fact not speaking to that question at all. Those passages are speaking about false Jewish teachers of the Apostolic Age who claimed to know Jesus personally.

Other Passages

While Murray does not refer to these, there are a couple of other passages that might be read as saying that those who fall away from the Church were never really in the Church in the true sense.

One of these is Matthew 7:23, where Jesus says to those who claim to have done mighty works in His name: “I never knew you.” Once again, however, the context of Jesus' statement is false prophets (7:15). He says that false prophets will be known by their works (7:16-20). He says that these false prophets will claim to have been Jesus' disciples on the day of judgment (7:21-22). To them Jesus says, “I never knew you.”

In context, it is clear that “knew” means “acknowledged, recognized, commissioned.”¹⁹ Jesus never acknowledged and commissioned these false prophets. As Yahweh told Jeremiah: “I did not send these prophets, but they ran; I did not speak to them, but they prophesied” (Jeremiah 23:21).

Other passages that are sometimes cited as teaching this are found in Romans 2:28-29, which distinguishes the outward and the inward Jew, and Romans 9:6, which says that not all Israel are of Israel. Certainly what Paul says in these passages is true enough: Some Jews, Israelites, Christians do not behave as Jews, Israelites, Christians should behave. Some only “go through the motions.” There is a “remnant” of the faithful within the Church as a whole.

But neither of these passages claims that those who are of the faithful “inward” “remnant” are all destined for heaven. At the time Paul wrote this, Demas would have been a member of the faithful remnant, but eventually he fell away. Paul is simply speaking of the Church as she really exists *in the present*. Some in the Church endeavor to be faithful and to live by faith in God and God's promises; others do not. God has given His promises to all. He has claimed them all. He has elected and called them all into fellowship with His Son. But not all are making their calling and election sure by persevering.

¹⁸Thanks to Dr. Joel Garver for pointing out this reading to me.

¹⁹See Bauer-Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (University of Chicago, 2000), p. 200d, under the number 7.

The Canons of Dort

The Canons reject the notion that the difference between temporary and persevering believers is a matter of duration alone (Canon 5, Rejection of Errors 7). Linked with this is Canon 2:8, which says that justifying faith is only given to those elected to heaven.

As regards Canon 2:8, I submit that this is a matter of definition. If we define “justifying faith” as “fully persevering faith,” then the statement is true enough: God has predestinated only those elect to heaven to receive “fully persevering faith.” If, however, we define “justifying faith” as faith that receives the promised benefits offered by God, we see that such faith can indeed be temporary. The wicked servant of Matthew 18, who was forgiven a vast amount, and who received this forgiveness, and who then turned around and threw another servant into prison, had his forgiveness taken away from him. He was declared justified, and received that justification by trusting the master (i.e., by faith), and then forfeited his justification. Hence, I submit that Canon 2:8 is true enough within the confines of one understanding of “justifying faith,” but that Canon 2:8 is not the only perspective from which “justifying faith” should be understood.

As regards Canon 5, Rejection of Errors 7, which rejects those “Who teach: That the faith of those who believe for a time does not differ from justifying and saving faith except only in duration,” I have two comments. First, if “justifying faith” is being understood again as “fully persevering faith,” then the statement is by definition correct.

Second, though, it is clear that the Canons mean more than this. They mean that whatever kind of faith a temporary believer possesses is qualitatively different from that of those elected to heaven. I am not sure we are at liberty to say this. Man looks on the outward appearance and only God knows the heart. It appears to me that the Canons go too far in trying to understand the hearts of men, and how God deals with men. Does the Bible invite us to make distinctions of this sort?

The Canons think it does. They refer to the Parable of the Sower, and interpret it as saying that those who fall away do not have the “root” in themselves. That is, they interpret the parable as providing a taxonomy of types of conversion. While this is a very common way of reading the parable, I believe there are good reasons to reject it. For one thing, assuming that the parable is a kind of taxonomy of types of conversion, the parable says that the seed did indeed spring up in two of the soils, but that it did not endure in them. If anything, this says that the faith was real but temporary. It does not imply that the faith was unreal in some way. It may be read as saying that three types of soil were inadequate and this is why the faith did not persevere; but nothing indicates what Dort says, that the quality of the faith itself was different. Moreover, the seed in each case is the same; the gift given is exactly the same in each case. Thus, in the parable the seed is the same in all cases, and the faith is the same in all cases; the only difference lies in the soil.

But what is the “soil”? The fourth soil is “good soil.” One might think “ah, this is the regenerated soil”; but the parable says nothing about the sower's changing the soil before casting the seed upon it. If anything, the parable says that the good soil was good all along, and did not need to be changed! That is what the parable will say if we press its imagery to be saying that the four soils are four types of human nature.

The parable is simpler than that. Jesus shows that people can respond to the word of the Kingdom in four ways, and uses the analogy of four kinds of soils. Other places in the Bible compare people to dogs, pigs, leopards, sheep, goats, and the like. This does not mean that some people are *really* dogs or sheep; only that they *behave* like dogs or sheep. Similarly, the soils here are four types of behavior, not four types of nature.

Beyond this, however, N. T. Wright has made a very good case for seeing the four soils as an allegory of the history of Israel, especially from the exile to Jesus. He argues that the “seed” is the faithful word-bearing Remnant and that the “soil” is Israel. He cites dozens of Old Testament passages where “seed” and “soil” have this meaning, establishing the context in which the disciples would have understood the parable when they first heard it. Birds are Gentiles in the Old Testament, and thorns are tokens of exilic judgment. There is nothing speculative here; the Bible has set up this imagery repeatedly, and the disciples were familiar with it.²⁰

Building on Wright's remarks, I suggest that the Remnant Seed was rejected wholly in the days leading down to the destruction of Jerusalem and into the Babylonian age. The Israel-Soil received the Remnant-Seed with joy when the Persians allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple, but then the Israel-Soil fell away. The experience of the Israel-Soil during the Greek period resulted in a choking out of the witness of the Remnant, down to the time of Jesus. But in the New Creation, the New Soil will receive the True Remnant (Jesus Himself) and will flourish.

What this reading means is that the soil did not produce the desired fruit because it was still the old and fallen creation. When the New Creation, the new soil, arrives, the soil will be fruitful.

It is certainly true enough that there are different aspects and qualities of faith manifested in the people of the Church. It is surely proper to exhort Christian people to live as they should, and to ask them if they are really trusting God day by day. It is proper to appropriate the language of the parable and warn people not to fall away under persecution and to beware of the seduction of cares and riches. But to press the language of the parable into teaching four kinds of human nature (or two kinds) goes way beyond anything warranted by the text.

Conclusion

My conclusion is that nowhere does the Bible distinguish between those who are “truly regenerate” and those who are “mere professors.” The Bible does not teach that God gives some baptized persons “true, full grace” and others “only partial grace.” What God gives is Himself, and there is nothing more that He can give.

Nor does the Bible teach that those who fall away were never really “in” the Kingdom of God. Quite the contrary: Their judgment will be so much more severe precisely because they were indeed in the Kingdom, and rejected it.

Perseverance unto the end is ultimately, of course, a matter of God's predestination. But those who persevere do not do so because they have been given more at the starting line, because they have received some kind of permanent “inward” metaphysical change. Rather, they persevere because God's Spirit continues to wrestle with them to the end. They persevere not because of anything inside themselves, whether their own power or some infusion from God, but because God maintains His personal relationship with them to the end, because they do not reject the favor and gifts that God truly gave them.

A Final Note on the Atonement

The Canons of Dort say that the atoning work of Jesus Christ was “sufficient for all,” in that it satisfied and propitiated the wrath of God, and it is God who is the object of the atoning

²⁰N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), pp. 230ff. See also Peter J. Leithart, “The Parables of the Kingdom,” *Biblical Horizons* 155 (July, 2002).

work. Traditionally, Calvinists have often said that the atonement has a general benefit for all men living in this present world, but a special benefit for those elect to heaven. Some have posited a “special but partial” benefit for those in the Church.

The position of this paper is that it is God who applies the benefits of the atonement as He sees fit. God is free to apply the full and special benefit of the atonement to some people temporarily and to others permanently. The special benefits of the atonement are “limited” in this world to those elected in the Church (and to those who believe but have not yet been baptized), and they are limited in the world to come to those elected to heaven.

The special (“limited”) benefits of the atonement are for those who are “in Christ.” Those who leave the Vine, who forsake the Olive Tree, cease to be “in Christ” and cease to receive the special benefits of the atonement. In the same way, many of those who received the benefit of the first Passover and were delivered from Egypt, eventually lost that benefit and died in the wilderness.

Only such an ecclesial conception of “limited atonement” can account for passages like 2 Peter 2:1, which speaks of those who “deny the Master who bought them.” These men were “bought” the same as all other Christians, and received exactly the same thing, being put “in Christ.” The atonement was “for them” in exactly the same way it was for Peter and John. But when they denied the Lord, they lost the special benefits of the atonement. All of this, of course, was in the plan of God.