

Why Reformed?

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I. Man's Main Goal Is to Glorify God and Enjoy Him Forever.

Since 2008, the church and mission organization, Arche e.V., has included “Evangelical Reformed Free Church” in its name. Since then, we have often been asked what the word “reformed” means.

As one might expect, it relates to the Reformation. However, it is not limited to the well-known reformers like Luther and Calvin but also encompasses many other Christian leaders who have continually worked to restore the gospel to its biblical foundations. These reformers include John Wyclif, John Knox, John Bunyan, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, George Whitefield, Georg Müller, Johann Gerhard Oncken, and many others. Their common goal was that the Holy Scriptures remain the sole standard. The church must always be reformed in light of the Holy Scriptures.

Over the centuries, these reformers wrote passionate confessions of faith and called their biblically faithful convictions “reformed theology”, a tradition that Arche proudly upholds. Correctly understood, reformed theology is simply the theology of the Bible.

We will now discuss the core of this “reformed theology” in turn. But first, an important clarification:

Do We Need Theology at All?

The word “theology” can be unappealing for many Christians. Even if they don't immediately think of Bible-critical theology, they often fear that it involves too much head and not enough heart; too much theory and not enough practice. I agree that this danger exists if teaching in the church

merely transfers knowledge, inflates the mind, and degenerates into a mental exercise. However, this will not happen if we understand that theology—the teaching about God—does not come from people but from the Most High Himself, in the form of the Holy Scriptures. Therefore, theology is a glorious gift from God, through which we are to recognize Him and His holy character. Theology is the prerequisite for truly loving Jesus and walking in His ways from the heart. It is indispensable if our thinking, feeling, speaking, and acting—indeed our entire existence—is to be shaped by God.

The story of the golden calf illustrates what happens when we disregard theology in this sense. God called Moses to Mount Sinai to stand before His holy presence for forty days and forty nights (*cf. Exodus 32:17 ff.*). What was he supposed to do there? Just have nice feelings? No, God's goal for Moses was pure theology! Moses had to engage deeply with God's holy nature and receive detailed instructions from Him. This included the specifics of the divine commandments, the order of the tabernacle and the priesthood, and the precise regulations for worship.

And what were the Israelites doing at the foot of the mountain while Moses was learning sound theology at the top? They committed an unprecedented act of apostasy. Under the leadership of Aaron, the first priest in Israel, they built a golden calf. While Moses was studying the mysteries of God's glory, his brother was crafting a new faith, tailored to the people's desires. It cannot be said that the people were entirely liberal, worldly, or atheistic. No, you might even call them the “evangelicals” of their day. But instead of praying fervently for Moses and striving for sound theology themselves, Israel introduced a religion that reduced worship to a creature. When they presented their creation, they shouted,

“These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”
(Exodus 32:4).

Everyone Has Their Own Theology! But Which One?

They weren't particularly into theology, but suddenly they had one. Christians who claim not to be interested in doctrine don't realize what they are saying. Their belief that doctrine isn't important is, in itself, a doctrine. In that sense, there are no Christians without theology. Every Christian has one. The only question is: which one? The theology of Scripture or the one that makes their ears tickle (*cf. 2 Timothy 4:3*)? While Aaron's theology sprang from the people's feelings and desires, Moses learned objective and unchanging truth from the mouth of God Himself. When Moses finally came down from the mountain, these two theological systems clashed irreconcilably. And they still do today.

What kind of theology was hidden behind the golden calf—literally, a bull? It was the image of an Egyptian god. Israel had adapted its religion to the pagan world from which they had just escaped. In return, they finally had a god they could control. Their new cow gave them no laws and demanded no obedience. Their self-made god did not interfere in their lives and did not call anyone to account. What a cozy theology with all the comforts! A god to cuddle up to, as long as we have good feelings. But do we really want such a convenient “fast food theology” that makes us spiritually sick? Or shouldn't the God of the Bible be our God? Don't we truly want to learn from Him and study healthy, wholesome theology? Yes, we want to go up the mountain with Moses to the Lord who has given us His eternal Word. We want to return to this source again and again. That is

why Arche calls itself the “Evangelical Reformed Free Church”. We aim to constantly and critically examine whether our teaching aligns with the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus Christ as the cornerstone (cf. Ephesians 2:20). In the following part of this series, we will take a closer look at the decisive characteristics of this reformed theology.

Not Man-Centered but God-Centered

The first and foremost characteristic of Reformed doctrine is its God-centered orientation, not man-centered orientation. God, not man, is the axis around which everything revolves. The usual question is, “What does God bring to man, for example, in the Gospel? What is useful for the creature?” But the Bible makes it clear that the primary reason for the plan of salvation is not man, but the glory of God. This is why the psalmist prays: *“Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name; deliver us, and atone for our sins, for your name’s sake!”* (Psalm 79:9). He does not pray, “Help us because we are in such dire straits or we will perish,” but rather, “Help us and save us for the glory of your name!” The Lord Himself confirms this approach, saying, *“It is not for your sake, (...), that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name”* (Ezekiel 36:22). The famous words, *“(…) He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake”* (Psalm 23:3), also emphasizes this fundamental biblical truth. God's primary goal is His glory. Everything He does is primarily for the praise of His name. This is why the Reformers coined the famous phrase *“Soli Deo Gloria”*—*Glory to God alone!* This is also why composers like Bach and Handel wrote the abbreviation S.D.G. instead of their own names under their compositions.

Today, however, Christian preaching often focuses on people, much like humanism does. Everything revolves around them, their needs and

expectations, their dignity, rights, and entitlements. Sermons sometimes sound like this: “Allow God to enter your life!” Excuse me? People are supposed to give God permission? Hardly anyone realizes how statements like this turn the whole Bible on its head. Another saying is: “If you don't want to, God can't do anything!” How? Does God's rule collapse because of the resistance of autonomous and self-determined people? Those who preach such errors are reversing the roles, giving power to man and powerlessness to God. It is tragic that even many of God's children do not recognize this distortion of biblical truth.

But What About the Dignity of Man?

Don't we forget the person if we focus too much on the glory of God? Reformed theology is often accused of having too low a view of man. But the opposite is true. A theology that truly centers on God and His Son Jesus Christ does not lower the value of man; it raises it. Reformed theology accomplishes this in two ways:

First, it takes people seriously for who they really are. It does not follow the mistaken path of certain theological schools that emphasize man's self-worth while leaving him in his true sinful state. These schools honor people by saying, “God loves you because you are so valuable”, but they do not address the mortal wound of their sin. What good is a patient's appreciation of a doctor who ignores their cancer and does not treat it? Similarly, one-sided talk about the dignity of man is meaningless if it ignores the fact that man is in a state of sin. Because God truly dignifies us, He does not downplay our sin but speaks openly about it and shows us redemption from the slavery of sin through Jesus Christ. Reformed

theology believes that we can only do justice to human dignity if we are honest with people and tell them the truth, even if it is hard to hear.

Secondly, from the perspective of Reformed theology, human dignity does not originate from within but is bestowed upon us from outside. It is not inherent, rather, it is given through undeserved grace. We do not possess it inherently; rather, we receive it. In ourselves, we are but dust. However, it pleases God to confer immense value upon His creatures, namely, His image. We do not generate our own value; rather, we receive it from our Creator. He is the source of our life, along with everything that accompanies it. He has clothed us in a garment of value, dignity, and worth that belongs to Him alone.

Therefore, the question of God's primary goal in saving people is crucial. Does He save them because their self-worth holds great significance to Him? If so, then the primary reason for their salvation would indeed be rooted in man. But what if people are not inherently worth saving, they do not merit it, yet the Lord saves them regardless? In that case, only one conclusion remains: God saves people for the sake of His glory. His glory becomes the primary objective of His plan of salvation. Certainly, we must not rigidly separate one from the other. After all, the glory of the Almighty, which He receives through His work of redemption, is also our salvation and blessing, both now and for eternity. Yet, it makes a significant difference to the direction of doctrine and faith whether we emphasize the glory of God or the dignity of man! In any case, the Bible affirms our belief that the glory of God takes precedence over everything else. This principle even applies to the punishment of the wicked. For in the event of salvation, God reveals both His indescribable grace and His righteous judgment. Both occur for the glory of His glorious name!

What Needs Do We Really Have?

Certainly, some readers may not be satisfied or agree with these statements. Their theology tends to assert: “If God fulfills my needs, then He gets glory through it!” This is how many understand the Christian life today: prioritize my needs first, then His glory. However, Reformed theology views things differently because the Bible itself presents a different perspective. Only when we prioritize the glory of God will our true needs be met.

For example, when we fall ill, often our initial instinct is to seek happiness in healing. We consider well-being to be an absolute blessing. But what if, instead, we first entrust the illness into God's hands and say to Him, “Lord, I want to learn to respond to this suffering in a way that truly honors You. I want to cultivate gratitude and patience, rather than grumbling. I seek my joy and contentment in You, not in my health. I desire to bring glory to You, whether in life or in death.” When Jesus Himself is at the top of our wish list, we experience fulfillment that never fades. However, if we prioritize our earthly needs first, we tether our happiness to transient things. Yet, if we prioritize the glory of Christ by making Him our joy, our happiness will endure, even amidst changing circumstances. Unfortunately, this biblical secret remains unknown to many, which is why preaching often focuses on being whole, prosperity, success, and recognition. No wonder that this theology, this “prosperity gospel”, yields a shallow faith that cannot weather life's true storms but culminates in bitterness and disappointment. That's why the Westminster Catechism states in its creed: “*Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.*” This means that only when man prioritizes God over himself does he discover true happiness and joy in God.

The Reformed Fathers of Faith cherished this fundamental theological truth, and we do too. Soli Deo Gloria.

2. “They Shall Let the Word Stand”

After being accused of heresy by both the church and state, Martin Luther was summoned to recant his teachings and writings at the Diet of Worms in 1521. His defense speech concluded with the nearly immortal words: *“If I am not convinced by the testimony of Scripture and clear reasoning; (...) then my conscience is captive to God's word. Therefore, I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither safe nor right. God help me, amen.”* Had God not protected Luther, these resolute words would have spelled his certain death. He no longer wished to ground his faith in a fallible church but solely on the Holy Scriptures.

This is why the famous **“sola scriptura”**, “Scripture alone”, became the rallying cry of the Reformation. This slogan meant that only the Bible held full authority to bind the consciences of believers, and no additional church traditions were necessary. Luther thus supplemented his statement at Worms with the following words: *“I do not believe in the pope or the councils alone, because it is certain that they have often erred and contradicted themselves.”* He juxtaposed the fallibility of people with the infallibility of the Holy Scriptures because, in his firm conviction, they are entirely God's inspired word. Creeds and church resolutions may be the noble work of insightful and enlightened servants of Christ, but they do not carry the weight of the word of God.

The Inerrancy of the Bible

This lofty view of the inspiration of Holy Scripture was shared by all reformers¹. They affirmed: “The Bible is God's word.” However, they did not make this assertion independently; they found it within the Bible itself. For it is written: “*All Scripture is breathed out by God*” (2 Timothy 3:16). When Paul explains the inspiration of Scripture in this manner, he employs a noteworthy Greek word, “*theopneustos*”, which translates to “God-breathed”. By this, the apostle aims to underscore that all Scripture is comprised of God's own words—breathed into the Bible by Himself. Therefore, it was evident to the Reformers that Holy Scripture is the “*verbum dei*”, the Word of God.

Of course, they did not imply that God personally wrote the pages of the Bible and delivered them from heaven as a finished book. Nor did they suggest that the writers of God's word mechanically transcribed what was dictated to them like involuntary robots. Such notions of divine inspiration are absent in the Bible itself. The crucial point is that the Bible writers were independent authors. Their unique expressions were fully preserved, yet they were nonetheless under the trustworthy guidance of the Holy Spirit in such a manner that no human error could infiltrate. Thus, the Bible not only recounts miracles but is itself a miracle. God did not produce the Holy Scriptures with the aid of human writing machines; rather, He utilized imperfect individuals to produce a flawless work despite their shortcomings.

This is why the proponents of the Reformation were firmly convinced that the Bible is infallible. It originates from God, and its creation

¹ When we refer to “reformers,” we don't mean only the classic figures like Luther or Calvin, but also the leaders of the free church reformation within Christianity.

was closely supervised by the Holy Spirit. If God is infallible, how could His words be fallible?

God's Word That Errs?

Unfortunately, many contemporary teachers depart from this clarity of the Reformation and speak of errors in the Bible, yet still label it as “God's Word” and even “inspired”. I understand what they are attempting to convey. They believe that the pure inspiration of the Holy Spirit has been compromised due to the fallibility of the writers. However, if that is the case, then the Bible should no longer simply be referred to as “God's Word”. What does that imply? God's Word that errs? How can one even consider the Bible “Holy Scripture” with such a perspective? If humans have tarnished it, then it is no longer holy. A little leaven of human fallibility spoils the whole batch.

To resolve this dilemma, it has been suggested that some aspects of the Bible should be considered as the pure word of God, but not the complete Bible. For instance, some propose that we should believe in Christ but not “blindly” trust the Bible in its entirety. Alternatively, it is taught that the Bible's purpose is to guide us solely in matters pertaining to “faith and life”, specifically matters of piety. In other domains, such as historical details or scientific facts, the Bible cannot be relied upon. These arguments sound quite clever. Their proponents maintain that the Bible is *infallible* but not necessarily *inerrant*. According to them, it may be infallible in matters concerning belief and conduct, but it contains errors in other areas.

To want to tear the Bible apart like that requires a good deal of audacity. For if it is infallible in teaching us what to believe, it precisely in-

structs us to believe that all Scripture is without error. Let us heed its own words: *“The words of the LORD are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times”* (Psalm 12:6). Or: *“Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him”* (Proverbs 30:5). These verses demonstrate the absolute reliability of the Holy Scriptures and affirm the truthfulness of every word spoken by God. That's why it also declares: *“God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind”* (Numbers 23:19). Other passages similarly assert that God does not lie or speak falsely (see 2 Samuel 7:28; Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18). Therefore, the Bible asserts that all its words are entirely true and without error in all their parts (see Psalm 119:89, 96; Matthew 24:35). This underscores that God's words are the ultimate standard of truth for everything it addresses. This is why Jesus prayed: *“Your word is truth”* (John 17:17).

The Bible repeatedly emphasizes that all Scripture is useful to us (cf. 2 Timothy 3:16) and that every part of it is “God-breathed”. Therefore, it is completely pure, perfect, and true. This is why Paul could say, *“I confess to you (...) that I believe everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets”* (Acts 24:14). Jesus also rebuked the disciples on the road to Emmaus: *“(…) slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!”* (Luke 24:25). The letter to the Romans contains similarly powerful words: *“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through (...) the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope”* (Romans 15:4). Jesus and the apostles consistently referred to all Scripture, never suggesting that any part was more credible or trustworthy than another. The Reformers upheld this view, and so should we today. Nowhere in the Bible is there any indication that we should doubt its words. The text ne-

ver suggests that its words are from God but are limited in validity because humans wrote them down. On the contrary, the writers of the New Testament refer to Old Testament texts and consider them all undoubtedly true, even details that are difficult to understand from a human perspective. For Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, Peter, and James, it was self-evident that the Old Testament texts were true, down to the last detail. For instance, they referred to Jonah's fish as a real event (cf. Matthew 12:40), Lot's wife turning into a pillar of salt (cf. Luke 17:32), Naaman the Syrian being healed of leprosy (cf. Luke 4:24), David eating the showbread in the temple (cf. Matthew 12:3-4), Abraham being almost a hundred years old (cf. Romans 4:19), Abraham paying tithes to Melchizedek (cf. Hebrews 7:1-2), the detailed accounts of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Rahab, and many other "heroes of faith" being real people (cf. Hebrews 11:3-31), and Balaam's donkey speaking (cf. 2 Peter 2:16). This list, which could go on and on, indicates that the writers of the New Testament relied on the veracity of every detail in the historical accounts of the Old Testament. They considered every reported detail to be true, with no reason to assume that the Old Testament contained errors. As Peter wrote, none of these prophecies were ever "*produced by human will*", but rather, "*holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit*" (2 Peter 1:21).

This also applies to the New Testament. Paul explicitly writes, "*And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit*" (1 Corinthians 2:13). He also insists that His word is not "*accepted (...) as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God*" (1 Thessalonians 2:13). Let us also bear in mind that Jesus told His disciples that the coming Holy Spirit would "*guide them into all truth*" and "*remind them of everything*" He had said (John 14:26; 16:13). This strongly indicates the divine origin of

the New Testament. Jesus makes it clear that through the guiding work of the Holy Spirit that the disciples would be able to record without error what corresponds to the truth of Christ.

Let us also pay close attention to what Peter writes. He urges the readers of his letter to remember the words *“foretold by the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles”* (2 Peter 3:2). Here, Peter places the instructions of the apostles on the same level as the writings of the Old Testament prophets, making it unmistakably clear that both the New and Old Testaments are the infallible and inerrant Word of God. That is why the following applies to the entire Bible: *“We have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts”* (2 Peter 1:19).

A Massive Attack on Faith

If we deny the inerrancy of Holy Scripture and assume it is not entirely true, we face a massive problem. Are we then allowed to imitate God by being less precise with the truth, perhaps even lying in small details? Ephesians 5:1 commands us to be imitators of God. However, denying inerrancy while maintaining that the Bible is inspired by God leads us to believe that God might have breathed His Word in its entirety but consciously accepted false statements. If God did this, it would imply that we only need to tell the truth in essence, allowing for lies in between. Is that our God? No. His whole Word is and remains the truth.

How can we trust God unreservedly if we don't even know whether the Bible is consistently true? The claim that it contains errors is a massive attack on our faith. No wonder faith is waning and obedience to

Scripture is becoming increasingly rare. If this continues, the “Christian faith” will vanish, driven by the doctrine that the Bible only contains God's word but is not God's word.

Anyone who denies the inerrancy of Holy Scripture commits another grave sin: they elevate the human mind above God's Word itself. They misuse their intellect to judge certain passages of the Bible, declaring them inerrant. Essentially, they claim to know the truth in some areas more certainly and accurately than God does. Such an approach is the root of all intellectual sin.

If Someone Adds or Takes Away...

Reformed faith recognizes five key characteristics² of the Bible. First, its **authority**, defined as follows: *The authority of the Bible means that unbelief or disobedience to a word of Scripture is tantamount to unbelief or disobedience to God.*

The second essential characteristic of Holy Scripture is its **inerrancy**, described as follows: *The inerrancy of the Bible means that its original manuscripts do not contain any claims that contradict facts.*

The third characteristic of Scripture is its **clarity**, meaning that the Bible is written in such a way that its teachings can be understood by all who wish to read it, seeking God's help and being willing to obey His Word.

The fourth characteristic is its **necessity**, which means that Scripture is essential for knowing the gospel, maintaining spiritual life, and understanding God's will.

² See also Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (1994), chapters 4-8.

The fifth characteristic is its **sufficiency**, meaning that *the Bible contains everything we need for salvation and eternal life, with nothing beyond this being necessary.*

Therefore, along with the Reformed Fathers of Christianity, we believe that the Bible has binding authority for all people, contains no errors, is clear enough to instruct everyone, is indispensable for knowing God, and is completely sufficient for salvation and eternal life.

That is why the words of Revelation are fully binding for us the Arche Church: *“If anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book”* (Revelation 22:18-19). We agree with Luther, who declared in his famous hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”: “Let the word stand firm!” Our passionate confession remains: **Sola Scriptura—Scripture alone.**

3. By What the Church Stands or Falls

“For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Romans 3:28).

On his deathbed, a Christian brother had serious doubts about his salvation and called for his pastor. The pastor comforted the dying man and assured him that he had no reason to be afraid because he had lived according to God's will. In another case, a pastor reassured his dying parishioner that he should face death with patience, and then he would at-

tain eternal life. I have personally been told, “If you don't go to heaven after such faithful service to God, who will?” The widow of a very well-known church pastor looked at me from her sickbed with anxious eyes and asked, “Will God be pleased with me if I go to Him?” A pastor reported on his visits to Christian retirement home, “It's shocking the fears with which long-serving children of God torment themselves at the end of their lives!” It always comes back to the same question: “How will I fare when I appear before God?” If the gospel does not triumph—specifically, the truth of justification by faith alone—then we are miserable people despite decades of attending church.

Where the Fears Come From

Why is it that we, as evangelical Christians, do not consistently and joyfully rely on the righteousness of Christ, which is imputed to us through faith, but instead continue searching for some kind of hope in ourselves—and then despair? From my observations, this stems from the fact that while the doctrine of the righteousness of faith still exists in churches and congregations, it has long ceased to be the central focus of preaching. However, when this precious doctrine of the imputed righteousness of Christ is no longer at the heart of the entire Christian message, it becomes suppressed, leaving a void that gradually fills with the poison of works righteousness. Those who do not fully rely on Christ inevitably begin to rely on themselves. Thus, we start to measure our Christian worth by our activities—praising our missionary and social efforts—and defining our faith by what we do rather than by what Christ has already accomplished. Questions about whether we read the Bible and pray enough, if we are good enough spouses and parents, or if we are devoted enough to our fellow humans start to dominate our thoughts. As we approach the end of

our lives, after a lifetime of sacrifice, doubt and fear creep in regarding whether God is pleased with us.

Why is this the case? It's because the doctrine of justification hasn't been deeply ingrained in us, nor have we truly internalized it. We've encountered it here and there, but haven't made it a lifelong pursuit, despite this liberating doctrine being something we can never unlearn. If the foundational truth of imputed righteousness is lost, the entire Christian doctrine is jeopardized, as justification encapsulates all other truths of the gospel. That's why we must diligently learn these truths day by day and distinguish the gospel from the law with utmost clarity. If the doctrine of justification fades across Christianity, we're left with nothing but error, hypocrisy, and idolatry.

What Justification Is and What Sanctification Is

Certainly, we do not wish to claim that the doctrine of justification by faith is exclusively unique to Reformed theology. While it is also embraced by other denominations, it can be argued that without the doctrine of justification by faith, Reformed theology would not exist. Martin Luther described this truth as the sun that illuminates the church, adding that, *“if this doctrine stands, then the church stands, but if it falls, then the church also falls!”*³ Martin Luther was not infallible, but he certainly hit the nail on the head with this statement.

The doctrine of justification addresses the most profound issue facing humanity: How can a sinful person stand before the judgment of a holy and righteous God? David expressed this fundamental human need with these words: *“If you, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?”* (Psalm 130:3). No one can stand before God on their own merit,

³ Dr. Martin Luthers “Sämtliche Schriften”, edited by Dr. Joh. Georg Walch, Volume 4, Commentary on Psalm 130:4, page 2047.

no matter how hard they try. What we need is a righteousness that matches the perfect righteousness of the Most High, a righteousness that only God possesses Himself. So, where do we obtain it? Only from Him. And how do we receive it? It cannot be earned; instead, it is given to us by God through Jesus Christ—imputing Christ's righteousness to us undeservedly. Therefore, when someone is justified by God, it means they are declared righteous in God's judgment. This means that while we remain sinners in our own nature, God considers us completely righteous because of Christ.

So we understand that **justification** is an instantaneous, legal act of God. It establishes an unalterable status before Him. The moment you were born again, God justified you and granted you a clear legal standing as a child of God. Based on Christ's completed work in His life and on the cross, He forgave all your sins and declared you righteous and incorruptible. While justification happens in an instant, **sanctification** is an ongoing process where we grapple with indwelling sin throughout our lives. Through the Holy Spirit's work, we progressively overcome sin and grow more like Christ. There's a common misconception that sanctification makes us righteous before God, implying it's a prerequisite for justification. This notion is incorrect and causes significant confusion. The Bible teaches the opposite: justification comes first, followed by sanctification. Initially, God justifies us by His free grace through Christ, and sanctification happens based on this foundation. Nothing spurs us more in our battle against sin, nor generates a greater desire to obey God's commandments, than the living understanding that we've been justified by Him. Those who fail to grasp this may attempt to earn what has already been freely given to them as a gift. He tends to believe that the doctrine of God's bestowed righteousness leads to an indifferent and lawless life. There is a fear that if

sinner is told God has placed them in a position of perfect righteousness through a single act of grace, they might think, “Okay, then I can go on sinning.” Such concerns have nothing to do with the gospel. Beware of preachers who seek to restrict grace because they fear it may be too generous and provide Christians with an excuse for superficiality. Even Paul faced accusations of going too far in his understanding of grace and teaching that we should “*do evil that good may come*” (Romans 3:8). What nonsense! The message of freely imputed righteousness never makes a born-again person complacent; instead, it inspires diligence and reverence in fulfilling God's holy will. It is not the pressure of the law, our willpower, or self-effort, but the truth of justification that truly jump starts a sanctified life. It is a serious mistake to think that the doctrine of unconditional grace leads to carelessness. On the contrary: because it deeply touches us, overwhelms us, and fills us with grateful love for Christ, it also ignites fervor in our sanctification. When the doctrine of justification is deeply engraved in our hearts, internalized, considered, and believed anew every day, it brings not only exuberant joy of salvation but also a holy earnestness to be obedient to the Lord. To summarize, let's contrast these two concepts. Through justification, we are declared righteous. Through sanctification, we learn to increasingly live out this imputed status. Justification is instantaneous, complete at the moment of divine righteousness. Sanctification, however, is a lifelong process of growth. In terms of justification, there are no differences among the children of God; they are all equally justified. However, there are differences in sanctification, the degree of progress varies. Therefore, you will never be more justified than you are at this moment, but hopefully, you will be more sanctified.

If we truly want to experience the fruits of justification for our spiritual well-being, we must avoid falling into the trap of thinking that we

remain righteous before God only if we contribute something in return. Just as a child has the legal status of being a child of its parents without any contribution of its own, so too we have the legal status of being children of God without any merit of our own. This status remains unchanged even if the child misbehaves. To improve, the child doesn't need to strive to maintain its status as a child of its parents; rather, it needs education. Similarly, God achieves this with us through our sanctification. How wonderful that is!

By Faith Alone

An important question arises: how do we receive or experience imputed righteousness? We have learned that it is God who declares us righteous for the sake of Christ. He is the one *“who justifies the ungodly”* (Romans 4:5). But how does this gift come to us? Through faith. The Bible states: *“For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law”* (Romans 3:28). Some interpret this to mean that faith is a substitute for good works, effectively just another precondition. However, this would imply that faith is merely another form of work through which we earn justification. This misunderstanding has led to the widespread belief that we must possess a certain amount of faith before God will be gracious to us. When we correctly understand God's Word, we see that faith is not a human achievement but the means or channel through which God grants us the gift of justification. To illustrate, imagine a water company that wants to give away water freely but requires individuals to lay a pipe from the company to their house to receive it. But with God, it is not like this. He not only gives the “water” of justification, but He also provides the “conduit” of faith to your heart free of charge. Both justification and the faith through which it flows to you are exclusively the work of God. This is why it says elsewhere: *“The righteous shall live by faith”* (Galatians 3:11).

The righteous live by the fresh water supply of faith, which the Lord has also installed for them by undeserved grace. Justification is grace, and the faith that accompanies it is also grace. Indeed, everything is grace. This is why the Bible says: *“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast”* (Ephesians 2:8-9). The righteousness imputed to us by God therefore flows to us by faith alone, without any human contribution. This is why Luther rightly said: *“Faith is not a human thing or work, but a gift from God, who both creates and sustains faith in us.”*⁴ This corresponds to the words of the letter to the Hebrews, which states that Christ is the *“author and perfecter of faith”* (Hebrews 12:2). So what happens in practical terms when God places this undeserved faith in a person's heart at their new birth? It is as if the Almighty installs a new eye through the Holy Spirit—an inner eye, “the eyes of the heart,” as Paul once said. This is why Spurgeon also called faith a sixth sense. The natural man has five senses: hearing, seeing, tasting, smelling, and touching. But in the new birth, a supernatural ability to perceive emerges, a divine sense of sight. The believer discovers truths that the natural man cannot perceive (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:14). That is why an unbeliever has so much difficulty understanding the testimonies of Christians. They have no eye for the gospel, no faith. But when God, in His sovereign grace, implants faith in a sinner, the sinner discovers something profound. He sees the saving act of Christ and, through the “sight” of faith, understands the righteousness imputed to him by pure grace. Through faith he sees it, is overwhelmed, worships God, and is certain of his salvation. Therefore, you too, through your gift of faith, keep looking up to the Crucified One and see your salvation. See that you have been declared righteous by God in Jesus Christ for time and

⁴ Dr. Martin Luthers “Sämtliche Schriften”, edited by Dr. Joh. Georg Walch, Volume 9, Commentaries on the Epistle to the Galatians, page 95.

eternity without any merit on your part. Look again and again, read the Gospel repeatedly, pray through it continually, and reflect day and night on the miracle of your justification. In doing so, you will become the happiest Christian you can be on earth.

And Where Are the Works?

As mentioned above, it is often claimed that **sola fide**—by faith alone—leads to laxity in discipleship. This is why some churches doubt the Reformers' doctrine of justification. They refer to James, who said: “*You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone*” (James 2:24). But is James really saying that our works are necessary for justification? No, not at all. He is emphasizing that living faith must be distinguished from dead faith. He wants to make it clear that no one is justified merely by an outward profession of faith. Anyone can say they believe, but whether they truly have genuine, living faith is another matter. There are many nominal Christians in our world who are only outward confessors and their lives remain unchanged. Five verses earlier, James writes that even the demons believe and tremble (cf. James 2:19). However, they possess only rational insight, not God-given faith. Here James gets to the heart of the matter: you can tell what kind of faith a person has by the works produced. If supposed faith has no works, then that faith is dead (cf. James 2:17). Jesus put it this way: “*You will recognize them by their fruits*” (Matthew 7:16). This means that if someone has living faith, good works will necessarily follow. However, these works are the result of the righteousness that was previously imputed and not the cause. Abraham's justification occurred in Genesis 15, without the merit of works, through faith alone: “*And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness*” (Genesis 15:6). As a result, Abraham naturally also performed good works such as the obedient sacrifice of his son Isaac, which occurred later in Genesis 22. James wants

to show us that Abraham's undeserved justification resulted in good works. This is why the Reformers taught, "Justification is by faith alone, but not by faith that remains alone!" By this, they meant that saving and justifying faith does not remain alone but always results in good works. This means that a justified person is always a changing person. Where there are no good fruits, there is no genuine faith. And if there is no faith, then there is no justification. A faith that leaves us as we are is not a justifying faith. Therefore, the prayer of our hearts is: *"Lord, revive your truth of our justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Let this biblical doctrine once again ripple through Germany and Europe—for Your glory and for the salvation of many sinners."*

As Luther wrote, "For this doctrine of righteousness by faith alone is the head and cornerstone which alone begets, nourishes, edifies, sustains, and defends the Church of God, and without it, the Church cannot stand for one hour." He is absolutely right.

4. The Covenant of My Peace Shall Not Fall Away

"For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you" (Isaiah 54:10).

In Article 7 of the Arche Church's Confession of Faith, we wrote: "The distance between God and man is so immeasurably great that the Almighty is under no obligation to him." Yet, God has graciously chosen to enter into a relationship with humanity. He does this within the framework of covenants. For example, God made covenants with Noah, Abra-

ham, Moses, and David. This means that God has established His relationship with us on an orderly basis, laying down the conditions for our relationship with Him within a regulated covenant. In other words, God does not live with us “wildly” like a man with a woman without a marriage covenant.

Although an agreement between people usually involves two equal parties, it must be clear that the terms of the covenant that God enters into with us are determined by Him alone. He is not a human being with whom we can negotiate a contract. This is probably why the translators of the Old Testament who translated it into Greek, as well as the New Testament writers, did not use the word “syntheke,” which emphasizes the equal status of two covenant parties, but “diatheke,” which emphasizes the unilateral, divine determination of the terms of the covenant. This is why the word “diatheke” can also be rendered as “testament.” In a will, the bequeather unilaterally specifies how the last wishes are to be carried out. The heirs cannot negotiate but can only accept or reject the stipulations in the will. This is the reason why some German translations of the Bible prefer to speak of a “testament” rather than a “covenant” (see e.g., Matthew 26:28). Even if God's covenants contain different details, they are similar in one fundamental element, which is always: **“I will be their God, and they shall be my people”** (Jeremiah 31:33; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Revelation 21:3).

The Covenant of Redemption

The very first covenant that God ever made was not a covenant with people, but for people. It concerned their eternal redemption. This is why Reformed theology often refers to it as the **“covenant of redemption”**. It is a covenant between the three persons of the Godhead and was established in eternity before all time. Consequently, it is also called the

“everlasting covenant” in the Bible (Hebrews 13:20; Isaiah 55:3). Because the triune God foresaw man's fall into sin from the very beginning, He made provisions in eternity, long before creation, to redeem people from the curse of their fallen nature by establishing the “covenant of redemption.”

This covenant is an agreement made before all time between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit for the benefit of the coming church, the bride of Christ. This is why Paul speaks of “*the eternal purpose that God has realized in Christ Jesus*” (Ephesians 3:11). In this eternal covenant it was also established that redemption would come only through the precious blood of Christ. This is why the Bible frequently refers to Jesus' blood as the “*blood of the covenant,*” or the, “*blood of the eternal covenant*” (Hebrews 13:20); see also Matthew 26:28; Hebrews 9:18, 20; 10:29.

This means that the plan of redemption was not an emergency solution devised when God saw the consequences of the fall of man. It existed before all time and is the very first covenant that God ever established.

In this covenant, the Father promised His beloved Son a people as His own. If we read Jesus' prayer in John 17 carefully, we notice that Jesus speaks at least eight times about people whom the Father has “given” to Him. For example, in verse 6, Jesus prays: “*I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me.*” In verse 9, the Savior prays “*not for the world, but for those whom you have given me.*” In verse 24, Jesus insists that “*whom you have given me, may be with me where I am.*” And when did the Father give this to the Son? Jesus gives the answer in the same verse: “*You loved me before the foundation of the world!*” Out of love, the Father gave the Son a people as His own—even before the foundation of the world. That is why the Savior not only speaks in John 17 of those whom the Father has “given” to

Him, but this beloved expression appears in many other places as well. For instance, He emphasizes, *“All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out”* (John 6:37). Therefore, those who come to Christ are always those whom the Father has given to Him. He also speaks of His sheep, *“My Father, who has given them to me (...)”* (John 10:29). To reassure His own, He affirms the Father's steadfast will, *“(...) and this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me”* (John 6:39). Indeed, it can be stated with certainty: *“God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: 'The Lord knows those who are his'”* (2 Timothy 2:19). Why does He know them? Because they were given into His hands by the Father in eternity so that He could redeem them in the fullness of time through His blood and they could be His bride forever, the people of His possession and the sheep of His pasture.

The roles in this eternal covenant are clear. The Father sends His Son and the Holy Spirit. Through the incarnation, the Son enters the arena of this world and dies on the cross on our behalf. The Holy Spirit reveals Christ's accomplished work of redemption to us, brings it close to our hearts, and applies it concretely in our lives. How overwhelming it is to realize that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit included us in the glorious covenant of redemption before the foundation of the world. That is why all of God's children are assured, *“I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you”* (Jeremiah 31:3).

The Covenant of Works

When God created man at the beginning of time, He gave him a rule according to which the relationship between Creator and creature was to be structured. This was the **covenant of works**, the first covenant that God made directly with man. As the term suggests, it was a covenant based on works that the Lord made with Adam and Eve in the Garden of

Eden. He said to them: *“You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”* (Genesis 2:16-17). Adam and his descendants were promised life, but only on condition of obedience. Life was the reward for fulfilling God's demands. Works formed the basis of God's first covenant with mankind. That is why the prophet Hosea says, *“But like Adam they transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with me”* (Hosea 6:7). We see that the Bible explicitly mentions God's covenant with Adam at this point. This covenant had to be upheld through works, as indicated by the principle, *“The person who does the commandments shall live by them”* (Romans 10:5; Ezekiel 20:11), but *“the soul who sins shall die”* (Ezekiel 18:4). This covenant of works was designed in a manner that demanded not just obedience, but perfect and personal obedience from Adam and his descendants. The concept of partial or incomplete obedience was entirely excluded. Man was uniquely created in the image of God before all other creatures, endowing him with both the ability and the responsibility to flawlessly reflect God's holy character. Thus, there was no margin for transgression, not even the slightest. From a humanistic perspective, such a covenantal demand may sound stringent. However, if we view the covenant of works through the lens of God's holiness, the perspective changes drastically. Every sin breaks God's holy covenant. The Bible teaches that God's eyes are too pure to tolerate evil (Habakkuk 1:13). Every sin is like an attempt to obscure God's holy eyes with poison. It is a deliberate attempt to overthrow Him and an affront aimed at defiling God's glory and honor. It is clear: *“The soul who sins shall die!”*

Living in a fallen world, sin appears commonplace to us and we often downplay the original terms and conditions God gave mankind in the be-

ginning. We minimize our wrongdoings with statements like, “No one is perfect!” or, “We all make mistakes!” as if occasional sinning were our prerogative. This is a significant and fatal misconception into which we have fallen. Nowhere has God ever granted permission for any human being to sin occasionally. No, His message is clear, “*Fear the LORD, and turn away from evil*” (Proverbs 3:7). It is incredibly arrogant to trivialize sin as merely a mistake when God's holy justice has decreed that every transgression is a scandal. Who are we to decide that sin is not serious, while the King of kings and Lord of lords has determined that it breaches the covenant and warrants death?

Nevertheless, we must not overlook the fact that the covenant of works also contains wonderful elements of grace. Before God established the covenant of works, He granted us existence, without any action on our part. He was not obligated to create anyone; it was purely His grace. Furthermore, it was grace that He initiated a covenant with us as human beings in the first place. The inclusion of a promise of blessing in this covenant on God's part was also an act of grace. As His dependent creatures, couldn't God have naturally expected us to obey Him without any special reward? Yes, undoubtedly! Yet in His generosity, the Lord infused grace into the covenant of works. He voluntarily promised us blessings, even though He was not obliged to do so. What a magnificent and gracious God we have!

The Covenant of Grace

Unfortunately, Adam and all his descendants refused to live within the framework of the covenant of works. Instead, they broke the covenant with God, rendering them incapable of ever living in obedience to their

Creator again. Since works could no longer save them, they urgently needed grace. God provided this by establishing a new covenant (Luke 22:20; 2 Corinthians 3:6; Hebrews 8:8; 9:15; 12:24), known as the **“covenant of grace”**. In this new covenant, the gospel, salvation, and life are freely offered to sinners through Jesus Christ. This new covenant is the practical realization and implementation of the “covenant of redemption” that the three Persons of the Godhead agreed upon from eternity. In the covenant of grace, the Lord promises to give the Holy Spirit to all those ordained to eternal life (Acts 13:48), enabling them to believe. The role of man in this covenant is to trust in Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and to repent, motivated by this given faith. Although the covenant of grace is completely different from the covenant of works, the covenant of works remains intact. God still exercises righteous judgment on lawbreakers. The new covenant is not a replacement, but a supplement to the old one. Not only Adam, but all of humanity remains under the covenant of works to this day. People may ignore it or even reject it, but they cannot escape it. All those without faith in Christ will be judged according to their works in the great judgment (cf. Revelation 20:12-13). Thus, we desperately need the covenant of grace.

We must also understand that the way of grace is possible only on the basis of the old covenant of works, which must also be fulfilled in the gospel. Fortunately, we no longer have to fulfill it ourselves since Christ has done it for us on our behalf. This is demonstrated through the wonderful doctrine of justification by faith. We must not forget that our salvation ultimately comes through nothing other than the perfect fulfillment of the law, which remains valid and to which Jesus Christ has shown comple-

te obedience. He has accomplished for us what we could no longer do. This is the covenant of grace.

The covenant of grace is a recurring theme through the entire Bible. Its various facets are manifested in the covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and, last but not least, with the redeemed church.

Children of God are children of the covenant. They have broken the covenant of works, through which God has shown once and for all that they cannot find life on their own. For this reason, He has prepared an eternal safety net for His own— the “covenant of salvation.” This ensures that they can be saved and remain saved through the covenant of grace during their earthly lives.

Almighty God even guaranteed these covenants of salvation with an oath, because He wanted to “show more convincingly (...) the unchangeable character of his purpose” (Hebrews 6:17). Thus, it remains true, *“For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you” (Isaiah 54:10).*

5. The Depravity of Man

Article 1, paragraph 1 of the German Constitution states very aptly: “Human dignity is inviolable!” This claim to value and respect should therefore be accorded to every human being by virtue of their humanity simply because they exist. Christians, however, prefer to base human dignity on the image of God, in whose likeness humanity was created. Unfortunately, the wrong conclusions are often drawn from this biblical fact. It

is argued that because God only creates good things, man must also be good, at least at his core. But is this so-called “Christian view of man” actually the “biblical view of man”? No! While the Bible does emphasize human dignity, particularly to protect against abuse by others (Genesis 9:6), it does not assert that man is inherently good. Instead, it points to the catastrophe of the Fall, through which man became morally corrupt. From the very first pages of the Bible, we are told how sin entered the lives of the first humans and poisoned not only them but also all their descendants. Just as the contamination of a spring spoils the whole river, so the sin of one person tainted the entire stream of humanity (Romans 5:12). Thus, evil permeates every human being to this day. It affects our whole person and every aspect of our being— body, soul, mind, will, and more. Every fiber of our existence is impacted, leaving no part of us untouched by unrighteousness.

A Rotten Tree

The Reformers often referred to the state of fallen man as “total depravity.” By this, they did not mean that every person is always as evil as they could possibly be at all times. Even a mass murderer might treat his dog lovingly. “Total” or “complete” depravity does not mean wickedness in its most extreme form, but rather a fundamental corruption of the entire human disposition. The Reformers leaned heavily on Jesus’ teaching: “*A diseased tree cannot bear good fruit*” (Matthew 7:18). The problem lies not in the fruit but in the root. Similarly, it is not our sins that are the real issue, but our heart, from which evil thoughts, words, and deeds spring (Matthew 15:19). We are not sinners because we sin, rather, we sin because we are sinners. We are so corrupt from the root that we only bring

forth evil. Just as you cannot gather grapes from thorns or figs from thistles, no human being can bring forth God-willed good from their sinful nature (Matthew 7:16). This has been the case since the Fall of Man. Since then, we have all been born with a sinful nature, a rotten root, and an evil heart, from which all our sinful actions arise. Paul calls this state “*being under sin*” (Romans 3:9). By this, he means that we are under the control of our sin nature and continually determined by it, thus receiving the damning testimony of the Bible:

“None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes” (Romans 3:10-18). The expression “*none, not one*” indicates how absolutely these verses are to be taken. There is no room for exceptions, apart from Jesus Christ. Apart from Him, there is no one who does good, not even one! The accusation is not that we do too little good, but that we never—not even once—do anything good.

Don’t Unbelievers Also Do Good?

But do we really never do good? Don't even unbelievers do good things? They can be friendly and helpful, can't they? Of course they can. The Reformers recognized this and referred to the good behavior of the natural man as “civic virtues.” However, they also saw that these good deeds only outwardly conform to God's law. Sinful people can certainly tell the truth or practice charity. But these deeds are not good in the ultimate sense

because when God evaluates people's good works, He not only looks at the deeds themselves but also at the motives behind them. And the most important motive that God expects is love for Him. An act that outwardly complies with God's commandments but is carried out by a heart that is far from God cannot please Him.

This is why Jonathan Edwards believed that the civic virtues of people, when examined closely, are ultimately motivated by self-interest. Their outwardly good actions are not driven by a desire to please and honor God, but by a desire to protect their self-interest. Certainly, a natural person obeys speed limits, but not to praise God, rather, to avoid getting a speeding ticket. Similarly, even unrenewed people file their tax returns on time, not out of love for God, but to avoid conflicts with the tax office. Yes, we fallen creatures do many good things, but more often because they are beneficial, earn us praise, and boost our self-esteem and not out of pure love for our God and Creator.

Original Sin

The fact that among fallen and unregenerate people there is no one who does good, not even one, is rooted in “original sin.” Though this specific term does not appear in Scripture, early Christian theologians found it useful to encapsulate the Bible's teachings of the origin of human sinfulness. This is why the doctrine of original sin is present in all historical creeds. It is derived from passages such as Romans 5:18, which states that “*one trespass (Adam) led to condemnation for all men*” and Psalm 51:7, which speaks of being conceived in sin. Job also touches on this concept when he asks, “*How then can man be in the right before God? How can he who is*

born of woman be pure?” (Job 25:4). Paul underscores this by stating, “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh” (Romans 7:18).

But if sinfulness is by nature in us, what can we do about it? If we can produce nothing but evil by nature, in what way can we be guilty? For the church father Augustine, this was not a contradiction. Because he recognized God's demands and at the same time saw his own inability, he prayed to the Lord, “Grant me to do what you command, and command me to do what is right in your sight!” His theological opponent, Pelagius, refused to pray in this way. He was of the opinion that it would be unjust of God to demand something from His creatures that they were not able to do. If He demands moral perfection from us, then we should also be able to achieve it. For Pelagius, grace was only a kind of relief in this human effort, but not absolutely necessary.

But according to Augustine and the Reformers, grace is not only a relief in our effort to obey God, but because of our fallen nature and the associated inability, grace is absolutely necessary. Why would God then retract His demand for perfection and holiness, which existed before the Fall? The Fall did not alter God's requirement but changed humanity. What was moral capability before the fall became moral incapacity afterward. Just because humanity has become legally incapable through its own fault does not mean that God forsakes justice. Therefore, the biblical conclusion is clear: without grace, nothing functions and without it, we are lost! Augustine captures this essence in his prayer, “Grant me to do what you command and command me to do what is right by you!” Similarly, the tax collector acknowledged our human depravity and inability with his prayer: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (Luke 18:13).

It's not surprising that humanism aligns with Pelagius' view of humanity. However, it is alarming that modern evangelicalism is increasingly adopting similar views. In a Gallup poll, the overwhelming majority of professing evangelicals in America stated that people are inherently good. In Germany, this survey would likely yield similar results. The reason some Christians hold these views is that they often overlook the fall of man and its profound consequences. They assume that humans after the fall are essentially the same as before, and that we are born with the same moral condition as Adam and Eve had prior to their disobedience. However, the Bible teaches us that the first humans lost their original righteousness due to sin, becoming enslaved to a fallen nature which they passed on to all their descendants. This is why we are incapable of doing anything good in the sight of God on our own. Our natural inclination is toward sin unless we can shed our sinful nature. Just as a cat cannot stop shedding fur, humans cannot stop sinning without the grace of a renewed nature. We invariably act according to our fallen state. As Augustine aptly put it, we are a “mass of sin” (*massa peccati*) and cannot return to God by our own efforts, much like an empty vessel cannot fill itself with water again.

Accordingly, Martin Luther also commented on original sin, “It is nothing other than all the malice and inclination to evil that all human beings feel within themselves!”⁵ Another statement by Luther reads, “The corruption of nature through original sin should not be minimized, but rather magnified, for if the extent of the damage and illness is not properly recognized, the remedy will not be desired either.”⁶ Luther also explained

⁵ XXIII 445

⁶ XXIII 447

what the remedy is, “Against original sin there is no remedy but grace.”⁷ Good works and moral effort do not help against our complete depravity, only grace (*sola gratia*) can transform us into a new creature through regeneration. It is not the improvement of our old nature that is necessary, but a complete new creation. This is why it is written: “*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come*” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Do Fallen People Seek God?

Here's another aspect of the doctrine of human depravity: Sometimes Christians claim that their unsaved acquaintances “seek God” or “ask for God”. But why do we say this when Scripture clearly teaches that no unregenerate person ever seeks God? As it states, “...no one seeks for God” (Romans 3:11). This statement might initially seem inconsistent with other passages that encourage us to seek God with all our heart. However, upon closer examination, we realize that every unregenerate person is not seeking God but rather fleeing from Him. He avoids the presence of God. What was the result of the first sin in the Garden of Eden? It led to mankind's initial flight—Adam and Eve fled from God's presence to hide their guilt. This tendency persists today. Instead of seeking their Creator, people run away from Him as far and as fast as they can.

Many people are certainly searching in some way. They seek happiness, personal satisfaction, and even religious experiences. However, they are only seeking things that God can provide, but they are not seeking Him. In our fallen state, we pursue all kinds of blessings but reject the One from whom they originate. This is the contradiction of depraved

⁷ IV 1574

humanity. Romans 3:12 not only asserts that no one seeks God but also declares that, *“All have turned aside; together they have become worthless”*.

In conclusion, we do not “find” God because we actively seek Him, rather, He finds us because He pursues us. The search for God does not reach its summit, as commonly stated, upon conversion; instead, it only commences or starts upon conversion. Only the person who has been born again and turned to the Lord earnestly begins to inquire about God and seek Him from the heart. It is only when God, in His grace, makes us new creatures through the Holy Spirit that we truly desire Christ and pursue sanctification. Jonathan Edwards captured this sentiment, “The pursuit of God is the main business of a true Christian!” Only when we become children of God does our longing turn toward Jesus. Before that, we are spiritually dull, dead, and incapable of lifting ourselves to God. That's how corrupt our old nature is. But there is grace! Blessed be the Lord!

6. On the Unfree Will

Does man have free will or not? Typically, the immediate answer is “yes.” Even most Christians don't hesitate to affirm, “Of course, man has free will.” However, let's pause for a moment and consider whether this assertion can truly be made so unequivocally.

In Everyday Matters

Let's begin by examining how our daily decisions are influenced. We choose what we want like the clothes we wear or the food we eat. Of course, we are free to say what we want. But this little postscript 'what

we want' is very important. Because we always desire what we desire in the moment or what we are inclined to desire. This means that our will is influenced by our current inclinations. Imagine you have just eaten your fill. Then it's very easy for you to decide to go on a diet. But after a while, the returning hunger may make you desire something else again. This shows that when we choose between two things, we are not neutral and independent towards them, we are biased by our perceived needs. Let's consider another example. A wife says to her husband, "Let's sit further back in the church." The man responds, "But you're closer to the front. Why do you want to sit at the back?" The wife honestly explains, "I'd love to see who's there!" So, her curiosity influenced her choice of sitting at the front or the back, it wasn't a neutral decision. This is where the factor of sin comes into play. When discussing free will, we must not forget that through the Fall, man became a servant of sin. As long as we do not live by the power of redemption, evil dominates our inclinations and generates sinful desires within us, which naturally influence our will. Yes, we make choices freely without external coercion. However, considering the power of sin in humanity, it doesn't seem appropriate to speak of absolute free will. Those who do so either deny the fall of man or suggest that it hasn't significantly affected human will.

What About the Decision For Christ?

Does man at least have free will in this matter? In paradise, man did indeed possess free will and had a clear understanding of good and evil, enabling objective choice between the two. However, since sin entered human nature, it naturally shapes our inclinations. When evil did not yet dominate him, he was free to choose either direction. But once evil became in-

grained in his character, he was no longer naturally inclined towards good, which is why every natural man continues to choose against Christ. As “*the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God*” (Romans 8:7), no natural man possesses the free will to follow Christ. A good acquaintance once complained to me that he had recently been slandered and robbed by many people. He even suspected the mail carrier of breaking into his house and stealing his laundry. It sounded quite paranoid. Naturally, I wanted to reassure him and mentioned that his friends were standing by him and the mail carrier couldn't possibly be going through his laundry. However, this only led him to cut off all contact with me as well and count me among his enemies. Caught in his paranoia, he eventually moved to another city and died years later in great loneliness. Although my friend made daily decisions freely, he couldn't trust his closest friends. When faced with whether to believe them or not, he was only free in one direction—to not believe them. Despite making this choice voluntarily, on his own, and without external coercion, it wouldn't be accurate to say his will was truly free. He was biased. Even though he theoretically could have freely chosen between trust and mistrust, he was psychologically predisposed to always harbor suspicion. Appeals to his reason were futile because his inner nature dictated his choice.

Of course, one might argue that this man was indeed ill. But isn't fallen man also sick? Worse yet, he is spiritually dead. Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians: “*And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest*

of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:1-5).

Here, Paul compares man's complete depravity⁸ with death, from which he is utterly unable to help himself. However, this “death” of the sinner is not biological but spiritual, *“dead in trespasses and sins”*. This spiritual death means that though physically alive, he lives in ignorance and according to worldly standards—*“according to the course of this world”* and *“according to the desires of the flesh”*. Every human being is naturally subject to the dictates of this “dead” existence, *“by nature children of wrath”*.

The Bible also compares this life to that of a dog. Just as a dog cannot escape its nature and *“returns to its own vomit”* (2 Peter 2:22), man likewise cannot escape his fallen nature but continues on the path of corruption. Just as a dog sniffs its way from one filth to the next, so man pursues his life in sin. He does so not under external compulsion, but entirely voluntarily, simply because it is his inclination.

Because man is ensnared in this unsuspecting manner, he does not desire to break free from it. This is why Paul describes this state as “dead”. This does not imply that fallen man lacks a will. Although spiritually dead, he still possesses the ability to make choices. However, this is limited to the realm of the flesh, not of spiritual life. He can only fulfill the desires of the flesh, not the will of God. This incapacity is precisely where his inability to turn to God lies, this is his spiritual death. It's not that he cannot freely choose within the confines of his fallen nature each day, but that choosing the divine is beyond his reach. He lacks the perception, or the antenna, for this. *“The natural person does not accept the things of the*

Spirit of God” (1 Corinthians 2:14). That is why he has as much interest in spiritual life as for example, a mole has in the sun. Therefore, it is not merely human will that matters, but God's resurrecting intervention. This is why Paul emphasizes, “*So then it depends not on human will..., but on God, who has mercy*” (Romans 9:16). Mercy is essential before anyone is willing. Indeed, God “*being rich in mercy ... even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved*” (Ephesians 2:4-5). Before there is any spiritual impulse in a person, any willingness, repentance, or conversion, we must first be made alive with Christ out of our spiritual death. Only then do we desire and only then do we believe. Before that, we are blind, deaf, and spiritually dead, lacking any will. For this reason, we give praise to the Lord who “*works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure*” (Philippians 2:13). Before the bones of the dead in the field, as Ezekiel tells us, could will or do anything, the breath of the Lord first had to blow on them and bring them to life (Ezekiel 37:1-10). In the same way, when we decide for Christ, life comes first, and then the will follows. Jesus teaches us this truth. He says, “*It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life...This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father*” (John 6:63-68). Thus, the Lord also speaks about the moral inability of the flesh. The flesh is of no use and incapable of reaching out to Christ. No one can come to Him through the natural human power. This is a radical and universally valid assertion by our Master. No one, at any time, could or can come to Christ on their own unless the Father first grants it. God must act to overcome our inability to choose what is good and divine. He accomplishes this through the

⁸ See Taube, September 2011.

life-giving Holy Spirit. When Jesus explained this, many of His disciples turned away. It challenges the notion of human moral capability. This truth resonates today, as it did then. Martin Luther's teachings align closely with Christ's spirit. In December 1525, Luther published a significant work sharply criticizing the humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam's doctrine of free will. Luther titled his response "On the Bondage of the Will", asserting that the will itself is nothing. The reformer debated whether, after the Fall, humans retained the freedom to choose God on their own strength or whether this decision itself was a gift of grace. Luther cited Paul and emphatically stressed that salvation from A to Z is solely by grace, not a reward for a good act of will. It does not trigger grace but is the result of grace. Otherwise, our salvation would rest on works of human will, which would pervert the Gospel. Luther strongly preached against the false doctrine of free will, stating, "Since humans are flesh, as God himself attests, they can only be inclined towards the flesh. Therefore, free will can only have the capacity to sin."⁹ Yet, we do not rely on Luther but on Holy Scripture. It is no surprise then, that all other reformers and many great men of Christianity consistently held firmly to this biblical truth. Why is this doctrine so important? Without it, we would arrogantly claim that we triggered our salvation through our "free act of will". Again, Luther's words resonate, "Whoever defends human free will, that it has any ability in spiritual matters and can cooperate even in the smallest way, has lost and denied Christ."¹⁰ Why is he so extreme? He sees it as twisting the Gospel. For anyone who views their own will as the decisive cause of

⁹ Luthers "Sämtliche Schriften", edited by Dr. Johann Georg Walch, Vol. 18, Column 1876 ff.

their salvation seeks to be saved by their own merit, which others cannot achieve. But the true Gospel acknowledges that we bring nothing to our salvation, not even our good will. For by grace we are saved, not by works, not even by works of our fallen will. Thus, the hymn writer is right in the song “Star, on which I gaze,” singing, “I bring nothing, Lord, you are everything!” We are saved, not because we willed it, but because God graciously and freely willed it. Therefore, let no flesh boast, not even free will. Honor belongs to the Lord alone. Praise be His name!

¹⁰ Luthers “Sämtliche Schriften”, edited by Dr. Johann Georg Walch, Vol. 22, Column 385.