

XXXVI.

Brakel and Comrie.²⁴

“If in anything ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you.”
—*Phil. iii. 15.*



We call the attention of our readers to the two lines which in the last century were most correctly drawn by Brakel and Comrie respectively; and we do not deny that of the two, Comrie was the more correct.

This is not intended to hurt the friends of Brakel, for then we should wound ourselves. However, altho the name of “Father Brakel” is still precious to us; altho we appreciate his courageous protesting against church tyranny, and heartily acknowledge our indebtedness to his excellent writings; yet this does not render him infallible, neither does it alter the fact that in the matter of faith Comrie judged more correctly than he.

To do justice to both men, we will cite their respective arguments, and then show that Comrie, who did not always see correctly either, was more strictly Scriptural, and therefore more strictly Reformed, than Brakel.

In the chapter on Faith (“Rational Religion,” ii., 776, ed. 1757), Brakel writes:

24 Brakel and Comrie were celebrated Dutch theologians in the eighteenth century.— Trans.

“The question is: *What is the essential, fundamental act of faith? Is it the assent of the mind to the Gospel and its Promises, or is it the trusting of the heart in Christ for justification, sanctification, and redemption?* Before we answer this question we wish to say:

“First, that by ‘trusting’ we do not understand a Christian’s assurance and confidence that he is in Christ and a partaker of Christ and of all His promises; nor his peace and rest in Christ, for that is a *fruit* of faith which some have more than others; but by trusting we understand the act of the soul, whereby a man yields himself to Christ and accepts Him, entrusting Him with body and soul, as, *e.g.*, one man entrusts his money to another, or as one entrusts himself to and leans on the strong shoulders of the man that carries him across a stream.

“Second, that such trust necessarily requires a previous knowledge of evangelical truth and assent to its credibility; and that, after that, faith exercises itself on and by its promises.

“We now answer the question already stated as follows: True, saving faith is not the act of the mind assenting to evangelical truth, but the trusting of the heart to be saved by Christ on the ground of His voluntary offering of Himself to sinners and of the promises to them that trust in Him. And we say also that *faith has its seat, not in the understanding, but in the will*; not being the assent to the truth it can not be in the understanding, and since it is trust it must have its seat in the will.

“The truth of what we have said is evident:

“First, from the name itself. What we call ‘to believe’ Scripture calls ‘to trust,’ ‘to confide,’ ‘to entrust.’ Speaking of divine things revealed to us in the Word alone, we must not be confined to our own language, for this would cause many to fall into error; but we should adapt our speech and understanding to the nature and character of the original Hebrew and Greek. For in our language ‘to believe’ means to accept promises and the narrative of events on the strength of another man’s word; but according to the force of the original languages the words, (GR. pi iota sigma pi epsilon w/tronos upsilon omega, HEB. He w/segol Aleph w/hataf segol Mem w/hiriq Yod Nun, KAf w/qamats Mem w/patah lamed, other text) are translated not only ‘to believe,’ but ‘to trust,’ ‘to entrust,’ ‘to lean upon.’ They are used, not to denote the nature of trust, but by trusting yielding oneself to Christ, relying on Him.

“Secondly, the Scripture ascribes the act of faith to the heart: ‘With the heart man believeth unto righteousness’ (Rom. x. 10); ‘If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the

Son of God' ([Acts viii. 37](#)). Trusting and believing are both acts of the heart, the will. If it be said that the heart refers also to the understanding, we answer, very rarely, and even then it refers not to the understanding alone, but also to the will, or to the soul with all its workings.

“Thirdly, if the act of faith did consist in the assent of the mind to the truth, it would be possible to have saving faith without accepting Christ, without trusting Him; and you may know and acknowledge Christ as the Savior as long as you please, but what union and communion with Christ does that afford? To accept Christ and to trust and lean on Him would be only an effect of faith, but an effect does not complete the being of a thing which is complete before the effect; and saving faith would not differ from historic faith, but be the same in its nature. For historic faith, is also the assent of the mind to the truth of the Gospel, and even the devils and the unconverted have this faith. If it be said that the knowledge of the one is spiritual and that of the other is not, we answer: (1) While it is true that the knowledge of the converted is different from that of the unconverted, yet the matter remains the same. Their historical knowledge, if assented to, is historic faith in the one as well as in the other. (2) The Scripture never makes the spirituality of historic knowledge the distinctive feature of saving faith. (3) This is certain that the knowledge of faith of an unconverted person is not spiritual. And from faith itself one can never ascertain whether he truly believes; this he can learn only from the fruits, and that would be altogether wrong.

“Fourthly, saving faith believes in God, in Christ, and does not stop at the Word, but through the Word reaches the Person of Christ and trusts in Him. ‘Neither do I pray for these alone, but for them also *who shall believe on Me, through their word*’ ([John xvii. 20](#)). This alone gives faith its point, nature, and perfection; wherefore Scripture says that saving faith is to believe in God, in Christ: ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved’ ([Acts xvi. 31](#)). To believe in Christ is faith itself and not the fruit of faith, which it must be if faith be mere knowledge and assent.



“Fifthly, it is faith itself that unites the soul to Christ, appropriates the promises, satisfies the conscience, gives access to the throne of grace and boldness to call Him Father (Ephes. iii. 17; John iii. 36; Rom. v. 1; Ephes. iii. 12). But mere assent to the truth cannot do any of these things. You may assent as long as you please, but that will never make a single promise your own; it will not unite the soul to Christ, nor will it give boldness to call ‘Abba, Father.’ Hence mere assent is not saving faith. It may be said that it is the work of the assenting mind to accept Christ and to trust in Him, and so the above-mentioned results flow from the assent of the truth. But I answer: (1) That mere assent as such can not have such results, but that they are its fruits; that the assent must first work acceptance and trust in Christ; hence it is the *form* of faith, and not its nature. Moreover, Scripture ascribes all these things to faith itself, not to its fruits. (2) The same may be said of the knowledge of the mysteries of the Gospel, that it has the same effect, that this also unites to Christ, appropriates the promises, etc.; but since this would be absurd, it is also absurd to say that mere assent works these things. And therefore it is certain that saving faith is not assent, but trust.

“Sixthly, the opposite of saving faith is not the rejection of the truth of the Gospel, but failure to trust in Christ. ‘He that believeth on the Son’: ‘He that obeyeth not the Son’ (John iii. 36, Dutch Translation); ‘Let not your heart be troubled—believe: also in me’ (John xiv. 1); ‘Where is thy faith?’ (Luke viii. 25). In the last text faith is contrasted with fear. Hence true faith is not assent, but trust.”

Brakel’s characteristic is that he considers faith, not as an inherent habit, but as an outgoing act of the heart; and, in connection with this, that the organ of faith and its seat are not in the understanding, but chiefly in the will.

Comrie, on the other hand, taught that faith is the increaded and inherent habit, the principal moment of which is to be *persuaded*.

In his “Explanation of the Heidelberg Catechism” (ii., 312) we read:



“The question, ‘What is true faith?’ is very important, deserving most careful consideration; for they only that have true faith can be saved. For altho in faith itself there is no inherent saving power, God has established such a connection between salvation and the imparted faith, that without the latter no person young or old can be saved. Children as well as adults must hereby be incorporated into Christ; for there is no salvation in any other.

“This question is terribly wrested and distorted by those that always speak of faith as an *act* or *acts*. Reading the definition of faith (Heidelberg Catechism, question 21), they say that this describes, not the *nature* and *character* of faith, but its *perfection* and *highest degree*. We will see how the Reformers have defined faith as an instrument according to the true foundation of the divine Word, in harmony with the doctrine of free grace and in its relation to justification, and not according to the principle of works of the semi-Pelagians, as many now do; who also say that the authors of the twenty-first question did not describe the *true faith* of which the preceding answer had shortly spoken, showing that they only can be saved that are engrafted into Christ and receive all His benefits by a *true faith*; but that they described the works of faith. But how is it possible that the authors of the Catechism could forget what they had just stated as the essential condition of salvation for every man, and speak of a high and perfect degree of faith, which is not attained by every one of the redeemed, if we take the words of the Catechism in their actual sense? No, beloved, the question refers to the same faith of which we have been speaking, the faith essential to all, children as well as adults; *i.e.*, the imparted faith, which we have defined as an *imparted faculty and habit, wrought in the elect by the Holy Ghost with re-creating and irresistible power, when they are incorporated into Christ; by which they receive all the impressions which God the Holy Ghost imparts unto them through the Word (regarding children in a manner unknown to us), and by which they are active according to the nature and the contents of the Word, the objects of which are revealed to their souls.* Hence the reality or sincerity of the imparted faith does not depend upon the acts of faith, but the sincerity of these acts depends upon the reality and sincerity of the faculty or habit from which they spring; so that; altho no acts spring from it, as in deceased elect children, yet they possess the *true faith*, from which acts would have sprung if they had been able to employ their rational faculties.

“Moreover, the imparted faith develops all its powers, not in an instant, but gradually; and altho one act does not appear as strongly pronounced as

another, this is no sign of insincerity; but it is the sign that such act or acts are not apparent. *E.g.*, the sense of taste can be perfect altho one never tasted sweetness, and to form an idea of sweetness is then impossible; yet when sweetness is tasted the idea is not produced by a new faculty to taste sweetness, but by a new object, which excites the faculty and produces the idea which was not possessed before.

“The same is true of the inwrought faith; with reference to the habit of faith it is imparted and perfected by the supernatural operation of the Holy Spirit in a moment, but it does not act until the soul becomes conscious of it. And this is why some men, who by reason of the bondage of fear of death all their lifetime were never assured of their state in Christ, could still be saved. However, we do not dwell upon this point; we wish only to say that the answer describes the real nature and character of imparted *faith* as a faculty, whereby we receive the knowledge of all that God has revealed to us in His Word, and as a confidence that Christ and His grace are freely given us of God,

“Hence it is evident—

“First, that faith consists in a conviction or persuasion. This is the *genus* of faith. Faith, whether human or divine, is impossible without a conviction of the mind of the reality of the matter which is believed. When this is lacking there is no faith, but only a guess, a fancy, or a supposition.

“Secondly, that this conviction or persuasion is the product or act, not of faith as such, but of the testimony which is so convincing and persuading that its truth cannot be doubted. This is the nature of all persuasion; the soul in order to be persuaded does not act, but merely receives the proofs of the matter in question, and becomes so deeply convinced that it is no longer at liberty either to reject or accept that conviction, but must yield itself with greatest willingness to the truth.

“Thirdly, *that according to the degree of clearness wherewith the divine testimony, as with an argument, impresses the imparted faith concerning the matters of our lost estate and the way of salvation, the conviction of the truth or of the contents of the testimony shall be more or less firm and persuasive.*

“Lastly, that as faith is *wrought* by a testimony, so it is also *made active* by a testimony of God’s Word, rendered by an operation of the Holy Spirit. Being therefore in the adult, the daughter of the Word (*Bathkol, filia vocis*), it is also from beginning to end subject to the Word, obeying and in all things following it. For among the Reformed this is an established rule, that through the operation of the Holy Spirit we first receive a faculty, from which subsequent activities proceed; and that this imparted faculty does not work of its own energy except it be wrought upon (*acti agimus*: being enabled we act) by the Word and the omnipotent power of the Holy Spirit accompanying that Word, in which and by which it enters and penetrates the soul as its instrument and organ, to excite the soul to activity and to flow into that activity.

“Concerning faith itself it should be remembered—

“First, that nearly all the old and private confessions of various martyrs, since the year 1527, have thus understood the imparted faith, as our Heidelberg theologians describe it, in the answer of the twentieth question in *general*, and in that of the twenty-first more particularly.

“Secondly, we must call your Christian attention to the acts which flow from the imparted faith. Theologians entertain different opinions regarding the number of these acts of faith, and which is the proper act of faith, just a word regarding both. In regard to the number, the celebrated Witzius mentions *nine*: three preceding, three proper, and three that follow. We do not object; every man is free to express himself as he pleases. Yet we prefer the ancient method which holds that faith consists of *three* things: *knowledge*, *assent*, and *confidence*. We have no doubt that all that God’s Word teaches regarding faith can easily be arranged under each of these three acts. Concerning the proper act of faith, which is called the *actus formalis fidei*; *i.e.*, the formal act of faith, the following opinions are held: (1) that it is the *assent*; (2) that, it is the *coming to Christ*; (3) the *accepting of Christ*; (4) a *certain confidence in Christ*; and lastly, that it is *love*. The discussions of the theologians on this point are violent, and many tracts are written by the various parties either to establish their own opinions or to refute those of others.

“Beloved, we judge that we could let this matter pass without noticing it, were it not for the fact that this definition may favor the semi-Pelagians in this respect, who hold that faith is an act, and that it receives its formal being by an act: ‘Forma dot esse rei’ (the form gives existence to the matter). And seeing that some begin to deviate, we say: *That no act or acts can give faith its form or being.* For this would imply that the imparted faith which the Holy Spirit works in the elect is an *unformed* faith, lacking that which is essential to its being. And this is absurd, since by this implied ‘actus formalis’ there is ascribed to us more than to the Holy Spirit; yea, a great deal more, inasmuch as the form is more excellent than the material. According to this supposition He imparts to us only the material of faith, without its form; and by our act or acts we give form to that formless faith.”

Our principal aim in citing was *that the student* might receive the contrast from the very lips of these two men, and so discover that the slight deviation of Amesius from Calvin and Beza in Brakel already inclines too much to the subjective; and that the *objective* character of saving grace is sufficiently covered only by the line of Augustine, Thomas, Calvin, Zanchius, Voetius, Comrie. Brakel was right in opposing the petrified dogmatism of his day. But when he systematized his opposition he went too far in that direction. In exactly the same manner as Köhlbrugge was right when, in opposition to his contemporaries, he maintained the objective as rigidly as possible, while his followers go wrong when they systematize his then necessary opposition.

Following the line of Augustine, Calvin, Voetius, Comrie, one goes safest.



XXXVII.

Faith in the Sacred Scriptures.

“With the heart man believeth unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.”

—*Rom. x. 10.*

Calvin says beautifully and comprehensively that the object of saving faith is none other than the *Mediator*, and invariably in the garments of the Sacred Scriptures. This should be accepted unconditionally. Saving faith is possible, therefore, only in sinful men and so long as they remain sinful.

To suppose that saving faith existed already in Paradise is to destroy the order of things. In a sense there was no need of salvation in Paradise, because there was pure and undisturbed felicity; and for the development of this felicity into still greater glory, not faith, but works, was the appointed instrument. Faith belongs to the “*Covenant of Grace*,” and to that covenant alone.

Hence it may not be said that Jesus had saving faith. For Jesus was no sinner, and therefore could not have “that assured confidence that not only to others, but to Him also, was given the righteousness of the Mediator.” We have only to connect the name of Jesus with the clear and transparent description of saving faith by the Heidelberg Catechism to show how foolish it is for the Ethical theologians to explain the words, “Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith,” as tho He had *saving* faith like every child of God.

Hence saving faith is unthinkable in heaven. Faith is *saving*; and he that is saved has obtained the end of faith. He no longer walks by faith, but by sight. It should therefore be thoroughly understood that saving faith refers only to *the sinner*, and that Christ in the garments of the Sacred Scripture is its only object.

Two things must, therefore, be carefully distinguished: faith in the *testimony* concerning a person, and faith in that *person* himself.

Let us illustrate. A ship is ready to sail, but lacks a captain. Two men present themselves to the shipowner; both are provided with excellent testimonials signed by creditable and trustworthy persons. Of the absolute truth of these testimonials the shipowner is thoroughly convinced. And yet in spite of this testimony one is engaged and the other dismissed. Conversing with both, the owner has found the first a very reasonable fellow, readily allowing him, as the owner of the ship, to issue orders; in fact, as captain he would have nothing to say. But the other, a real sailor, demanded absolute control of the ship, otherwise he would not take the responsibility. And, since the shipowner enjoyed issuing orders, he preferred the meek and tractable captain and dismissed the rough sailor. Consequently the tame commander, obeying orders, lost the ship the first voyage, while the rival ship commanded by that Jack-tar returned home laden with a rich cargo.