

## CHAPTER ONE

# THE PURPOSE OF THIS DOCTRINAL INQUIRY

*What is man that you are mindful of him, and  
the son of man that you care for him?*

PSALM 8:4

Our first series studied the rise of common grace and traced its course until Bethlehem, on the basis of holy Scripture. Our second series then sought to determine the meaning common grace has already gained from the first to the second coming of Christ—which still lies in the future. It further examined what, according to the apocalypse of the New Testament, common grace will mean for the end itself and for what comes after the end. Together both series thus constituted a bird’s-eye view of the course of common grace in the history of our race and of our world, from the fall until the restoration—or, if you will, from paradise to the parousia. This is a process that crosses centuries; its course is necessarily divided into two parts by the first coming of Christ.

§ 1

It is now necessary for us to examine common grace doctrinally so that it can be better understood as a mystery, and so that it can be understood in relation to other doctrines or dogmas.

To orient our readers, we must immediately point out that dogma possesses not only an aspect that points toward heavenly things, but also an aspect that is turned toward what is earthly. Each dogma or doctrine springs from the root of religion, such that any point in any dogma that we no longer sense as relevant to our religion withers in our consciousness and fades from our faith. We see this in the history of the doctrine of angels. Originally this doctrine was woven into everyone’s religious consciousness, because all people realized that angels had to be taken into account in their own religion and for the life of their own souls. But since the world of angels became entirely divorced from many people’s own religious consciousness, and because it retained no other significance than that of a piece of heavenly life that dissolved before us in poetry, this doctrine ceased to be part of the content of people’s faith. Thus, doctrine or dogma always has an aspect that is directed upward and an aspect that is directed downward. This is true such that our Belgic Confession does not hesitate to declare concerning the dogma of the holy Trinity, “All this we know as well from the testimonies of Holy Writ as from their operations, and chiefly by those we feel in ourselves.”<sup>1</sup> Here it is stated plainly that the doctrine of the Trinity also has an aspect that is turned toward us and that explains a portion of the life of our own soul. And when we consult the Heidelberg Catechism, we find that the confession of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit connects in an even narrower sense with three moments in our personal existence: the confession of God the Father with our creation, the confession of God the Son with our redemption, and that of the Holy Spirit with our sanctification.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Lord’s Days 1–33 speak of faith under this threefold division, and only then follows the discussion of the law and of prayer.

§ 2

That this must be so, and cannot be otherwise, lies in the nature of religion. In religion there are two things—God and man. The right communion of man with his God lies in religion. For now we leave aside the question of the various relationships in religion that concern knowing God, trusting God, submitting oneself to God, fearing him, loving and honoring him, and being his child in all these things. For our present purpose, it is enough if it is recognized that everything not relevant to religion falls outside dogma. If people realize that religion is always aimed on the one hand toward God

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1. Belgic Confession, Art. 9.

2. See Heidelberg Catechism, LD 8, Q & A 24.

and on the other hand toward man, then every doctrine must also always be viewed from these two aspects.

Regarding the side turned toward man, in the manifestation and life of man, on the one hand, we are dealing with what falls under our observation and can therefore be determined without the help of dogma; but on the other hand, we also are dealing with a hidden aspect of man and of human life. Relative to that, we can adopt only three positions: (1) agnosticism, (2) hypothesis, or (3) revelation. Agnosticism—that is, the system of *not* knowing—acknowledges that there are enigmas in man and that man walks amid riddles, but it forgoes the attempt to allow light to shine on those riddles. The agnostic acknowledges that there is a mystery but he lets it be a mystery and considers every attempt to unlock it to be pointless and hopeless.

The man of hypotheses judges differently. He likewise begins by determining that in man and in his life we are faced with a mystery, but he also claims that we certainly have the means at our disposal to penetrate that mystery: the manifestation of man's being and life in the visible world. He investigates these manifestations. For him, those are what is known. From the known data he now seeks to arrive at the solution of the unknown. He does this by assuming suppositions or hypotheses and investigating whether the assumptions would explain the unknown—if what he assumes is true. If he does not succeed, he rejects the supposition and takes refuge in another hypothesis. On the other hand, if he considers his assumption to be able to explain the unknown, then he declares that he has found the key to the mystery and announces his hypothesis as the result of science. In this way the system of materialism found acceptance for a while, and with much ado it was peddled as science. But at present people, even in unbelieving circles, have almost universally come to the conviction that the hypothesis of materialism is foolish.

The third way, finally, is that of dogma or doctrine, and is taken by those who, just like the preceding two types of persons, acknowledge the existence of mystery within man and within human life; but these people confess that light can fall upon this mystery only if God lets light fall upon it. For that reason, since God gave us his revelation, we sin if we posit with the agnostic that there is no light, since this would be a repudiation and ungrateful denial of God's love that comes to our aid. But we sin equally if—like the man with the hypothesis—we deliberately close our eyes to this God-given light and sit in our own artificial light, peering at what we

do not understand anyway, and by closing the shutters keep out the light that God wants to let shine through our windows. A man walks a straight path only if, gratefully accepting the light God has given, he accepts as dogma or doctrine what God has revealed to us in his Word concerning this human mystery.

§ 3 If we ask which mystery the dogma of common grace sheds its indispensable light upon in man and in human life, it will not be difficult to perceive it clearly and plainly. We observe two powers in man and in human life: on the one hand the power of sin, and on the other hand the power of what is good and beautiful. If we follow the course of sin in our own heart and in the life of the world, then all is dark and somber, ashen-gray and deathlike, and ultimately leads to death in its manifold forms. Then there can remain no room for anything in man and in human life that is good and lovely. If, on the other hand, we leave sin out of consideration for a moment and look at all kinds of refreshing things in man and in human life that enthrall us, then human life still offers us so much that is lovely and so much that fascinates us and strikes us as beneficent, that we could almost ask ourselves if the whole notion of the depravity of our nature through sin does not rest on legend and illusion.

We encounter contradictory phenomena here. At times we become pessimists and see the world appear before us in devilish form, such that there is nothing good in it. At other times, however, we become optimists and feel delighted by the abundant display of noble sentiment, robust resilience, and earnest intent that we observe in life around us. This contradiction can weaken us. We almost reach the point where we despair because of sin and assent to the *ex profundis* of wailing humanity, but then life fascinates and charms us so much that we might begin to see sin as a force virtually conquered, and concurring with the panegyric of humanism, might burn our incense to humanity. As we alternate between the two notions and dispositions of the soul, we discern more and more that we stand before an enigma. If we follow the one route, we end up being contradicted by the facts of the good and lovely in humankind and in human history. But if we take the relative good as our point of departure and try to follow our route from there, we similarly end up being contradicted as we encounter the dreadful manifestation of sin. Therefore neither the one nor the other *leitmotif* proves to be correct. We grope about, and we feel that there must be a third something since both routes lead us in the wrong direction. We detect the presence of that third something, but we do not see it and do

not know it. And so that third something becomes for us the mystery that lies hidden here.

This mystery becomes even more obscure and enigmatic for us when we take into account the grace that struggles against sin. We confess that this grace is not from man but from God. We acknowledge that this grace operates only through faith and that therefore a separation enters life between those who want this faith and those who go counter to this faith. From this perspective the fact is simply that believers and unbelievers stand over against one another in the world. We will forgo for the moment a more precise distinction. We take *belief* and *unbelief* in the most general sense. There are those who believe in Christ, and there are those who do not believe in Christ at all. This causes life to be divided into two streams: those who believe, and those who want something else, intend something else, and strive after something else. And if we belong to those who believe, no matter what charitable sense toward our fellow human beings inspires us, we come into conflict—involuntarily and without seeking it—with those others. We face conflict in the domestic, social, political, and—even more strongly—in the ecclesiastical sphere. But in our understanding, a higher jurisdiction stands above the dispute with unbelievers. Our faith claims to be indispensable in overcoming sin and making an honorable life possible. And now comes the unbelieving person who with evidence shows us how particularly in our circles, all kinds of sin are still active, whereas in the circle of the unbelievers all kinds of good and attractive manifestations of a nobler approach to life can be observed. That is why the unbeliever cannot understand the indispensability and effectiveness of our faith, and why we in turn begin to doubt the reality of the distinction between faith and unbelief. If within our group that has faith, there is so much to complain about, and so much in the unbeliever's group to be commended apart from faith, what then remains of the validity of the distinction that divides all of life? This continues on a personal level, as often as we catch ourselves sinning in spite of our faith, and conversely are so often put to shame by the elevated, noble sensibilities in the man without faith.

Here again, therefore, an unknown force is in play. We are convinced from history and the experience of our own soul that a world-conquering power is hidden in faith. Nevertheless, in life the relationship between believers and unbelievers does not correspond to the conclusion we would draw from this power of faith. On the other hand, we know from both history and self-knowledge what evil power lies in sin—including the sin of

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unbelief. And yet, also herein the outcome again and again does not correspond to the conclusion we were compelled to draw. There must therefore be a third something that interferes here. We can detect but not explain this third something. And from that angle as well, we stumble upon a mystery for whose unveiling we keep calling.

§ 5 This same mystery appears even more starkly in the contrast between the kingdom of grace as embodied in Christ's church, and the kingdom of nature as manifested in the life of the world. Here again we take the concepts *church* and *world* in their most general sense. But under whatever form we take this distinction and contrast, it would follow from our confession that the light would radiate from our church and the shroud of darkness would hang over the world. That which is pure, holy, pleasant, and harmonious should be sparkling in our church in an eye-catching manner. By contrast, the shroud of the impure, sinful, and less noble should be hanging over the world. Yet the facts are *not* in agreement with this. Already in the days of the apostles there were instances of terrible sin in the church of Christ, and in century after century the life of the church has supplied something that gave legitimate cause for complaint. By contrast, in the life of the world so much has developed that is interesting, so much that is beautiful, and so much that is attractive that we sometimes have felt a struggle well up in us to turn away from the church and to seek our place in the life of the world. The sharp line of demarcation our confession drew between church and world turned out to be unable to withstand the test. And we saw how in order to escape from this disappointment, the one person simply retreated into his church, refused to hear about the world, and—to avoid being hindered by this disappointment—ultimately became a spiritualist; whereas the other person, in order to cast off any notion of narrow-mindedness, became in effect a child of the world and either let go of his church or made his church worldly.

Here again we have the same struggle. On the one hand, we have the fact of history and the confession of our own heart that the church is the salvation of the world. And on the other hand, we have the facts before our eyes that the church remains so far below its own standard, while the life of the world appears to supply so much more than what apparently could be expected from it. Here again, there must be a third something that can provide an explanation of this apparent contradiction. This is a mystery we encounter without it being immediately unveiled for us.

When giving direction to our own life and steering our own life's course, we run into the same uncertainty. If our human nature is depraved to such a great extent and the world so far sunk under the curse that from that world and from our nature in that world nothing can come that can survive when weighed in the scales of the holy; and if, by contrast, the gospel is the only salt that prevents decay; and if the church of Christ is the sole creation of God that bears the mark of eternal permanence—is it not then reasonable that we withdraw our talent, our vigor, our time, our efforts from that world and direct them wholly toward the church and the gospel? Yet this is not possible. A rare individual may be able to find his life's work as a preacher in this country or as a missionary sent out among pagans or Muslims. Another who is independently wealthy may direct all his vigor toward philanthropic work. But what is impossible in any case is that *all* members of the church could devote their earthly existence entirely to spiritual matters. Each mother already has an entirely different calling in the home. This includes the requirements of day-to-day living, food preparation, taking care of clothing and entertainment, as well as the upbringing of children and preparing them for life in civil society. And besides, where would the thousands who have no money but must earn their own bread and their family's bread find that bread if they did nothing throughout their entire life but be directly occupied in the kingdom of Jesus? Paul himself functioned as apostle in the evening after having sat with canvas on his lap working in the tentmaker's shop in the morning and afternoon. This means that for the vast majority of believers in Jesus, the larger portion of their strength and time is spent in labor—and not in the kingdom but in the world. And it means that they can take delight in activity of a holy character primarily only on Sunday and then only in the morning and evening hours.

This also does not correspond to the contrasting valuation of life in Christ's church and life in the world. If the life of the world flows away toward perdition and into nothingness, and if only the life of Christ's church possesses the mark and guarantee of eternal permanence, how then can the world give a child of God satisfaction? And how can he be in harmony with his life conviction if he actually devotes nine-tenths of his life to what passes away and has no purpose, and is left with at most one-tenth for that which has value for his heart? According to his confession it should be different; according to the demands of life it cannot be any other way. Here again a third something must play a role that modifies this implication of

his faith. And he does sense and notice that third something, but he cannot bring it to light. It is and remains a mystery to him.

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We could continue pointing out the same contradiction in virtually every area of life, between on the one hand the consequence of what we confess, and on the other hand what we find before us in real life. We cannot deny these facts, nor can we surrender our confession—yet the two do not fit together. To be sure, if we weaken the concept of sin, blur the distinction between nature and grace, let church and world merge, and consider our work in the world and in the sacred realm as being identical in kind, then we do not encounter this problem. But what does this mean other than surrendering our confession, going over to the camp of the Moderns, and thus accepting the standard of the world as *the* standard?<sup>3</sup> Or by closing our eyes to the profundity of things, we could also float along on the surface, half unthinkingly, and say that we don't worry about these contradictions as long as we do not feel them and are not bothered by them. But what does this mean, other than that we fall asleep and close our eyes and escape from the riddles of life by not truly living? If we say, on the other hand, "I hold fast to my confession, the contrast between grace and nature exists, sin is a force in life, and I do not close my eyes to the struggle this causes in our human life, but I stand with an observant, inquiring, and questioning eye and I search for the solution to the mystery that has me in its grip"—then it is impossible for us not to have personally discerned that disturbing contradiction on each of the points we discussed.

Indeed, we would go still further. When the Moderns in this country thought for a time that they had wiggled out of the grip of these enigmas by erasing the boundary, they merely dreamed a beautiful dream from which all too soon they awoke to bitter disappointment. Even though they had surrendered the contrast between nature and grace, they nevertheless held on to the contrast between the sacred and the profane, between what is noble and what is ignoble. And behold, even in this weakened form, the revived contrast immediately confronted them again with similar enigmas,

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3. Modernism was a theological movement associated with thinkers like J. H. Scholten (1811–85), one of Kuyper's teachers. It viewed the progress of history as culminating in the moral primacy of the state, which had surpassed and replaced the church as the main locus of meaning and significance. Added to this was a corresponding derogation of the authority of confessional standards and the rigor of doctrinal affirmation. Originally attracted to Modernism, Kuyper later turned toward orthodoxy, which placed him in opposition to the movement.



which have led to very diverse solutions in their own circle and which still continue to divide attitudes among them. This is what is brought about by sin, that terrible force against which they consider themselves honor-bound to do battle. But that very battle is inconceivable without the ranks and battle arrays surfacing again and again, where friend and foe become entangled. Initially their whole battle was against us. Now they have come to the point of realizing that they must look for their enemy elsewhere, and that in their efforts to overthrow the enemy they have to come back to much of what we held and to the things in us that they were contending against.

## CHAPTER TWO

# THE PROBLEM TO BE SOLVED

*He turns rivers into a desert, springs of water into thirsty ground, a fruitful land into a salty waste, because of the evil of its inhabitants. He turns a desert into pools of water, a parched land into springs of water.*

PSALM 107:33–35

§ 1 The battle between our understanding and the reality we sketched in our previous chapter, based on the life experience of many and drawn from life itself, could be formulated succinctly this way: *the world turns out to be better than expected and the church worse than expected*. Since we have been raised in a confession that, as generally understood, knows nothing of the world other than that it is bent on evil, and of the church little else than that it is the congregation of believers, we expect to encounter in the world sin upon sin, and to feel attracted in the church by an ideal, holy life of love. And a person who, expecting to find it so, goes out into the world at an adult age and has the good fortune of being allowed to find himself in more noble-minded worldly circles, after having heard of much censure and ecclesiastical vexation in church circles, will doubt the correctness of his confession; he will find the expression *the world was better than expected, the church worse than expected* to be a reflection of his own experience.