

**The Pastoral and Practical Theology
of Wilhelmus à Brakel**

**A Brief Evaluation of the
*The Christian's Reasonable Service***

by

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The Pastoral and Practical Theology of Wilhelmus à Brakel

1. Introduction

General Observations

Father Brakel and Dutch Reformed Orthodoxy

From the inception of God's church, it has pleased the Lord to use a cloud of witnesses to fulfill the rich covenant promise of His Word that His truth shall be to every generation (Psa. 100:5; 105:8). In the execution of His eternal and sovereign good pleasure, the Lord has used a countless multitude of sinful men, quickened by His Spirit and called to the sacred ministry of the Word, to preach the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth. Among them, however, God has sovereignly elevated some of His servants above the level of the common and often obscure ministers of the gospel. Not only has the exalted King of the church been pleased to use them in an extraordinary manner during the short span of their earthly ministries, but He has also often been pleased to bless their written legacy centuries after He has translated them into glory. Still today, God is using many of their writings to minister to His church and to bring lost sinners into the sheepfold of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Across the span of the ages, their ministries continue to bear the stamp of divine approval. Such is true internationally of such eminent servants of God as Augustine, Luther, Calvin, John Owen, John Bunyan, Jonathan Edwards, etc.--but it is also true at a national level in those nations in which God has caused His gospel to flourish, particularly during the two centuries following the Protestant Reformation.

When considering the Post-Reformation history of the Reformed churches in the Netherlands, the name of *Wilhelmus à Brakel* (1635-1711) will come to the foreground as one of the premier and most widely read representatives of Dutch Reformed orthodoxy.¹ The prominence the Lord has been pleased to give to this man, his ministry, and his written legacy is such that until this present day his name recognition exceeds nearly all the men of God with whom Jehovah has graced His church in the Netherlands during the last three centuries. This is particularly true in those Reformed churches which highly esteem experiential preaching--preaching which not only consists of a faithful exposition of Scripture, but also of a faithful application of that exposition to the believer and his experience. In these church communities the name of Wilhelmus à Brakel is a household name, even for the common church member.

This is particularly to be attributed to à Brakel's *magnum opus*, *De Redelijke Godsdienst* (*The Christian's Reasonable Service*). Since its publication, the veneration for this work among those of orthodox Reformed persuasion has been such that in former generations (as recent as the pre-World War II generation) it was customary to read *De Redelijke Godsdienst* sequentially during long winter evenings.ⁱⁱ This long standing practice is a significant reason why this eminent divine, one of the acclaimed fathers of the Dutch Reformed tradition,ⁱⁱⁱ continues to be held in such high esteem until the present. Already during his forty-nine-year ministry in the Netherlands (1662-1711), during which several editions of *De Redelijke Godsdienst* were printed, esteem for him was such that he was affectionately referred to as "Father Brakel," a name by which he is still known today in the Netherlands.

à Brakel and the Dutch Second Reformation

à Brakel's ministry transpired during one of the most blessed periods of Dutch church history,^{iv} the period of the *Nadere Reformatie*, known in the English-speaking world most commonly as the *Dutch Second Reformation*.^v Therefore, in order to understand the enduring significance of à Brakel's ministry, and particularly the significance of the greatest achievement of his ministry, *De Redelijke Godsdienst*, we must briefly examine its historical context.

The *Nadere Reformatie*, which literally means "further reformation," represents a rather well-defined period and movement in the history of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. This historical designation of the movement expresses the common objective of the ministers whose ministries comprise the *Nadere Reformatie*: the further reformation of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands.

Its approximate chronological boundaries are the early part of the seventeenth century and the latter part of the eighteenth century. It is generally agreed among scholars that the ministry of Willem Teellinck (1579-1629) marks the beginning of the *Nadere Reformatie*,^{vi} who is known therefore as the father of the *Nadere Reformatie*, whereas Theodore VanderGroe (1705-1784) is considered to be the last clearly distinguishable representative of this movement,^{vii} and is therefore referred to as *de hekkesluiter* (the one who closed the gate).

Historically *de Nadere Reformatie* coincides and largely runs concurrent with both English Puritanism in the British Isles and German Pietism. Each of these movements had as a common objective to make the wondrous truths of Scripture, rediscovered in the Reformation, a vibrant reality in the hearts and lives of ministers and parishioners alike, and thus strive for a life of genuine piety issuing forth from a life of intimate fellowship with God. These three movements are therefore at times placed under the one umbrella of European Pietism.^{viii}

In global terms these three movements do indeed represent one historical movement; however, each movement had its own unique distinctives. Joel Beeke comments: "Each was rooted deeply in the sixteenth-century Reformation and longed for more thorough reform; yet each movement retained a distinct, historical, theological, and spiritual character."^{ix} English Puritanism was primarily an ecclesiastical reaction to conditions in the Church of England, the church of compromise; German Pietism was a reaction to the dead orthodoxy of the Lutheran Church in Germany; and *De Nadere Reformatie*, though a reaction against the dead orthodoxy in the Dutch Reformed Church, clearly had as its objective the further reformation of the entire nation of Holland.

The *Nadere Reformatie*, though striving for the sanctification of heart and life as the other movements did, was therefore a uniquely *national* movement which particularly during its early, militant stage had as one of its explicit goals the national, moral reformation of the Netherlands.^x Stirred up by

the unparalleled prosperity of the historically coinciding Golden Age of Dutch History, the Netherlands was a nation falling prey to the lusts of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life (1 John 2:16).

The nature and objectives of the *Nadere Reformatie* are perhaps best expressed in a definition of this movement formulated by the SSNR (*Stichting Studie der Nadere Reformatie*^{xi}) in 1983:

à Brakel and his ministry functioned at the approximate center of this movement, both historically and theologically.^{xii} On a time line, beginning in 1606 with the ministry of the father of the *Nadere Reformatie*, Willem Teellinck, and terminating in 1784 with the death of Theodorus Vander Groe, à Brakel's ministry (particularly his most important pastorate in Rotterdam from 1683-1711) marks the center of this time line. However, more significantly, his ministry represents a remarkable balance of the *Nadere Reformatie* relative to both its early and concluding stages. "Wilhelmus à Brakel could be considered a model for the entire movement,"^{xiii} and must be considered as one of its primary representatives.^{xiv}

Early in the *Nadere Reformatie* there was a strong emphasis on the outward manifestation of internal piety, i.e., a godly walk. One will find this particularly in the writings of Willem Teellinck who zealously strove to promote the godliness he had witnessed during his stay among Puritan brethren in Bambury, England.^{xv} In the eighteenth century, subsequent to à Brakel's ministry, when the goal of national reformation had become an ideal rather than a reality, the *Nadere Reformatie* internalized.^{xvi} Consequently, the preaching and the writing of the later representatives of the *Nadere Reformatie* increasingly focused on the internal experiences of the heart, since an external piety which did not issue forth from internal piety became prevalent. This explains why the ministries of Alexander Comrie and Theodorus Vander Groe, two of the final representatives of the *Nadere Reformatie*,^{xvii} are very discriminating in nature and focus more on the constituent elements of saving faith and its exercises than on the life of sanctification.

In à Brakel's ministry, both the discriminating treatment of saving faith as found in Comrie and VanderGroe, as well as the detailed exposition of the life of sanctification as found in Willem Teellinck,^{xviii} function in a balanced manner. Justification and sanctification function biblically as two inseparable sides of one coin. This scriptural balance does justice to the internal and external dimensions of Christian experience. Here lies the one reason for à Brakel's enduring influence as a premier divine of the *Nadere Reformatie*. In fact, à Brakel's *Redelijke Godsdienst* is one of the main reasons why the influence of the *Nadere Reformatie* extends until this day in a vibrant and recognizable manner in orthodox Reformed circles in the Netherlands.^{xix} His ministry represents a Christianity that is thoroughly scriptural, experiential, and devotional. In his major work we find one of the most complete, comprehensive, and balanced expressions of *Nadere Reformatie* theology.

F. Ernest Stoeffler summarizes as follows: "His main distinction...lies in the fact that in his *True Service of God*^{xx} he supplied Reformed Pietism with a theological textbook which, unlike the *Marrow of Amesius*, came out of a tradition wholly native to the Netherlands. In it he, too, preserved the balance between the mystical and ethical elements in Christianity which is so characteristic of the great Pietists in the Reformed communion."^{xxi} This naturally leads to the question: To what extent is there a relationship between the *Nadere Reformatie*, *De Redelijke Godsdienst*, and *Puritanism*?

à Brakel and English Puritanism

Anyone conversant with the English Puritans who reads à Brakel will be struck by the similarity between the two. This similarity should come as no surprise. In the overall movement of Pietism, the kinship and interrelationship between Puritanism and the *Nadere Reformatie* is perhaps the strongest. As Beeke states, "The *Nadere Reformatie* is in fact the Dutch counterpart to English Puritanism....The link between these movements is strong historically and especially theologically."^{xxii} In fact, scholarship has yet to settle the question definitively to what extent both movements influenced each other.^{xxiii}

Gisbertus Voetius, the theologian par excellence of the *Nadere Reformatie*, paid a visit to England for the purpose of indulging himself in unadulterated Puritanism.^{xxiv} Jacobus Koelman, a prominent representative of the Dutch Second Reformation, and a contemporary and friend of à Brakel, was strongly influenced by Puritanism.^{xxv} Also à Brakel himself was "...very enamored with the practical godliness and preaching style of the English."^{xxvi}

Another contributing factor to the influence of English Puritanism on the *Nadere Reformatie* was the translation of a large number of Puritan writings into Dutch--which occurred to a far greater extent than the other way around. The preoccupation of the Dutch Reformed Church with doctrinal controversies such as the Arminian controversy during the early part of the seventeenth century, left little time for devotional writing. This vacuum was filled by a steady stream of translations of Puritan writing which clearly put a stamp upon the *Nadere Reformatie*. The men of the *Nadere Reformatie* felt kinship with the Puritans, and so endorsed their writings that they imported and recommended their writings without reservation to the Dutch public.

W. J. op 't Hof, one of the leading Dutch Second Reformation scholars in the Netherlands, comments as follows:

First, the influence of Puritanism was largely embodied in writings, either in English or translated in Dutch. This is not to say that, secondly, the significance of personal contacts is to be underestimated. This applies both to Dutchmen in England and to Puritans in the Netherlands. Thirdly, the impact of Puritanism is nearly exclusively confirmed to exponents of the *Nadere Reformatie*. Fourthly, these men, Voetius and J. Koelman for instance, were no uncritical recipients of Puritan ideas. In the fifth place, in the course of the seventeenth century Puritan influence began to manifest itself in some new ways. In both Koelman and M. du Bois this is shown in the area of spiritual (auto)biography and in Koelman's case also in his resistance to fixed formularies. In the sixth place, most exponents of the *Nadere Reformatie* prove to have been substantially and in some cases even very decisively determined by the impact of Puritanism. In the seventh place, it was precisely the chief and the most influential exponents of the *Nadere Reformatie* who were most imbued with Puritanism. Finally, not only did Dutch devotional writers frankly confess their dependence and orientation towards Puritans from England and Scotland, they also warmly recommended them and to the best of their ability promoted the reading of Puritan writings, which they also contributed significantly to by either undertaking translational activities themselves or stimulating others to do so. Having been nearly exclusively indebted to Puritanism for its rise and having been largely determined by its early period, the *Nadere Reformatie* during the whole of the seventeenth century remained exceedingly dependent on Puritanism. It is this dependence which explains why the large increase of *Nadere Reformatie* writings did not detract from the need of and demand for Puritan works, either in English or translated into Dutch. The dependence was so great that the peak years of the *Nadere Reformatie*, 1650-1670, coincide with those of the Dutch translations of Puritan writings.^{xxvii}

In fact, this is one reason why the availability of à Brakel's *magnum opus* in the English language is significant. à Brakel's work bridges English Puritanism and the equally rich heritage of the *Nadere Reformatie*, which due to the language barrier has largely been inaccessible to the English-speaking world. Those who have acquired a taste for the spiritual delicacies found in Puritan writings, will find their spiritual appetite amply satisfied by the rich treasures found in *The Christian's Reasonable Service of Wilhelmus à Brakel*.

Since this work was the ripe and mature fruit of his ministry, a biographical sketch of this remarkable man of God and his gospel ministry is now in order.^{xxviii}

A Biographical Perspective

Youth and Education (1635-1662)

Wilhelmus à Brakel was born on January 2, 1635, in Leeuwarden, the capital of the Dutch province of Friesland. He was the only son of two very godly parents--a renowned minister of the gospel, Theodorus à Brakel, and Margaretha Homma. The godliness of these parents placed its stamp on the rearing of their son, the only survivor of six children. Wilhelmus was trained in the fear and admonition of the Lord. His mother would at times pray so intensely for him that she would forget herself. Of his father Theodorus, Dr. Fieret relates the following incident recorded in the classic biography of Wilhelmus à Brakel by Dr. F.J. Los: "Following his childhood, Wilhelmus attended the Latin school in Leeuwarden. At that time his father pastored in the village of Beers, southwest of Leeuwarden. Distance made it impossible to travel back and forth each day. Wilhelmus would come home on Saturday and return to school on Monday. His father would accompany him for a distance. As long as possible he would watch his son in the distance while quietly beseeching the Lord to protect him. This concern and dependency upon God made such a deep impression upon Wilhelmus that he would frequently be in prayer himself as he continued his walk to Leeuwarden."

To the joy of his parents Wilhelmus manifested the fear of the Lord at an early age. "Later in his life à Brakel said he knew of no change in his life. From his earliest years he remembers having a great love for His Savior Jesus Christ."^{xxxix}

His parents provided him with a thorough education, culminating in his study of theology at the Franeker Academy in preparation for the ministry of the gospel. In 1659, at the age of twenty-four, à Brakel was declared a candidate for the ministry. Since there were hardly any pastoral vacancies in Friesland, he was not ordained into the ministry until 1662. The interim period was a very fruitful period for him, however, as he studied at the University of Utrecht under the well-known theologians, Gisbertus Voetius and Andreas Essenius. Particularly Voetius greatly influenced him in regard to his personal piety.^{xxx}

Pastor in Friesland: Exmorra, Stavoren, Harlingen, Leeuwarden (1662-1683)

For twenty-one years à Brakel served in his native province Friesland. With great zeal he began his ministry in the difficult and indifferent congregation of Exmorra. His diligent labors during his three-year pastorate there were not in vain, as there was evidence of a noticeable stirring and blessing during his tenure. While laboring in Exmorra, the Lord also granted him a godly and faithful wife, Sara Nevius, with whom he enjoyed a blessed marriage in the Lord.

From Exmorra, the Lord's way led to Stavoren in 1665. Though little is known about his ministry in Stavoren, his close friend, Abraham Hellenbroek, wrote: "The extraordinary fruit which he enjoyed in Stavoren has been very significant and widely recognized."

He became pastor of Harlingen in 1670, where he labored for three years with great blessing. As Rev. Hellenbroek noted: "The shining forth of the countenance of God upon his ministry was also...evident for him there.... A wondrous change took place under his ministry. He has begotten a multitude of spiritual children there."

In 1673 à Brakel accepted the call from the congregation in Leeuwarden, the city of his birth. For ten years he ministered to this large congregation as one of six ministers. His pastorate there was not without controversy. When intense desire to instruct his flock in the ways of the Lord led him to organize house services or "conventicles," he met with opposition from his consistory which was fearful of the formation of churches within the church. à Brakel finally acquiesced in conducting a public catechism

under the auspices of the consistory.

He also came in conflict with his consistory and the governing officials of Friesland when he permitted his exiled fellow minister, Jacobus Koelman,^{xxxii} to preach in his pulpit. When the government of Friesland also wanted to forbid him to preach, à Brakel stood his ground and challenged the government's right to interfere in the government of the church. à Brakel prevailed, and as a result of both his courage and the publicity surrounding this controversy, he became a man of national renown.

After weathering the Van Giffen controversy, in which à Brakel took a public stand against Rev. David Flud Van Giffen and his Cocceian views concerning the interpretation of the Old Testament, à Brakel accepted the call from Rotterdam where he would serve for twenty-eight years until his death in 1711.

Pastor in Rotterdam (1683-1711)

Through his previous pastorates, the Lord had prepared à Brakel for the great task that would await him in Rotterdam. He was installed on November 21, 1683 by Peter Tilenus and preached his inaugural sermon from 2 Corinthians 5:20. Fieret writes: "In this sermon he only allowed God's Word to speak for itself; he shared nothing concerning himself. He did not mention where he came from, where he had served, what labors he anticipated to perform, etc. He spoke as one who had been commissioned to pass on the words of His Master, or as he himself wrote later: to be the mouth of God to the congregation. This certainly is indicative of the seriousness with which he commenced this new episode in his life."^{xxxii}

During his lengthy pastorate in Rotterdam, three matters stand out: his struggle against the Labadists, his battle for the independence of the church, and the publication of his *magnum opus*, *De Redelijke Godsdienst*.

The Rotterdam pastor took a strong stand against the teachings and practices of the Labadists, the followers of the converted French Jesuit, Jean de Labadie. De Labadie, who had come to the Netherlands from Geneva, spoke out strongly against the ills that plagued the church and promoted "a pure church in which the Christian religion would be practiced as strictly as possible."^{xxxiii} He became a strong proponent of a pure church consisting only of true believers, to which he joined a unique unbiblical mysticism. Initially he had a tremendous reputation and following, and caused a great stir in the Netherlands. à Brakel, deeply troubled about the corruption of the church and the lack of vital godliness, confessed that during his pastorate in Stavoren he felt very much inclined toward de Labadie and his teaching. After an intense spiritual struggle concerning this matter, he was persuaded that de Labadie's views were unscriptural.

Once à Brakel had a settled conviction about this matter, he took the Labadists and their views to task, being convinced that their teachings were detrimental to the well-being of the church. As was so common in these days, he became involved in a battle of the pen. His best known polemical work in regard to Labadism is *Leer en Leydinge der Labadisten* (Doctrine and Government of the Labadists). History proved à Brakel to have been correct in his analysis of Labadism, which, due to the unbiblical extremism of its teachings and practitioners, largely collapsed as a movement.

As he had done in Friesland, à Brakel strenuously opposed any manifestation of Erastian church government. His unwavering conviction was that Christ alone is the Head of His church and that the government--be it local, provincial, or national--has no business intermeddling in church affairs. This uncompromising stand resulted in a confrontation with the city fathers of Rotterdam who annulled the call extended by the consistory of Rotterdam to David Combrugge to fill the vacancy of the deceased Johannes Ursinus. When à Brakel, in response to this, preached a sermon about Psalm 2:6, "Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion," the battle lines were drawn. à Brakel was consequently prohibited to preach--an order which he ignored due to his conviction that as a minister he was accountable to King Jesus only. For a while he even had to live in exile, though he continued to preach. This conflict, in

which à Brakel had the full support of his consistory, was finally resolved by the intervention of Governor William III (who later also became king of England). He persuaded the magistrate to leave the matter rest.

The third matter for which his Rotterdam pastorate is best known is the publication of *De Redelijke Godsdienst (The Christian's Reasonable Service)*. After all the upheaval he experienced in battling the Labadists and the local city fathers, he entered a tranquil period of his ministry during which he could devote himself to the work that has endeared him to the hearts of so many, and was without question the most significant accomplishment of his lengthy ministry.

Last Days

On August 30, 1711, Wilhelmus à Brakel preached the gospel for the last time. In his last sermon, during which he often had to sit down, he expounded the preamble of the Lord's prayer.^{xxxiv} This message concluded the public ministry of a man of whose preaching Hellenbroek said that he could thunder as a Boanerges, comfort as a Barnabas, instruct as a Paul, and allure as a John.^{xxxv}

Until his last day he remained a man of prayer who continually interceded for the welfare of Zion, and particularly for his beloved congregation of Rotterdam. He also remained faithful to his calling to speak on God's behalf, exhorting whenever he had the opportunity. One evening, when suffering from much anxiety, he asked that the following message be conveyed: "Tell the congregation in my name that I have preached to her the truth which I have known; which I have tasted; which one can rely upon; by which one can obtain salvation; and trusting in which I die."^{xxxvi}

On October 30, 1711, an hour before he died, someone asked him how he was doing, to which he replied, "Very well; I rest in my Jesus; I am united to Him; I but wait that He might come; however, I submit myself with all quietness."^{xxxvii}

After having been comforted by his son-in-law, Rev. Van der Kluit, Brakel closed his own eyes, and calmly entered the eternal rest that remains for the children of God. He died in the Lord at the age of seventy-six after having served His Master faithfully for forty-nine years in the ministry.^{xxxviii} His Spirit-anointed ministry lives on, however, in the work we shall now examine more closely.

The Christian's Reasonable Service

à Brakel's Objective in Writing this Work: To Minister to the Congregation

à Brakel's objective in writing this work was straightforward: to instruct and edify the congregation of the Lord. In this work we hear the heartbeat of one who was consumed with love for Christ and His church and who deemed it to be his singular calling to be a faithful pastor to His flock. This explains why à Brakel does not claim to have presented a ground-breaking treatment of Reformed theology--and indeed, his work is not a systematic theology in the classic sense of the word.^{xxxix} It is more than a systematic treatment of theology: It is *experiential* systematic theology.

That this was à Brakel's intent is evident from the subtitle, in which he expressed that *De Redelijke Godsdienst* is a work "in which divine truths concerning the covenant of grace are expounded, defended against opposing parties, *and their practice advocated* [emphasis mine]."^{xl} In other words, what à Brakel presents in this work is *applied theology*. The theology he presents is a living, experiential theology. One does not need to read long in this work to detect its warmth and spiritual vibrancy. Therein lies the secret of the success and prevailing influence of this work. à Brakel speaks the language of Scripture from and to the heart.

Its importance was therefore recognized soon after it was published (though à Brakel initially had difficulty finding a publisher). F.J. Los comments: "Being founded upon God's Word, Brakel's work has become the most popular dogmatics of the Reformed in the Netherlands."^{xli}

As of today, at least twenty-six editions have been published in the Dutch language, to which must be added a translation into the German language and the recently published four-volume English translation, entitled *The Christian's Reasonable Service*.^{xlii} Never could à Brakel have anticipated that his work would be so widely received and would exert its influence until this very day--much less that this work would become available to the English-speaking world. Stoeffler makes a striking observation in this regard:

In the preface of this work, à Brakel expresses the wish that he could preach to all of the Netherlands, and even to all the world. He therefore rejoiced in the invention of the printing press which, by way of the printed word, enabled him to reach every Dutchman with the truth he yearned to preach. His wish has been fulfilled beyond what he could have anticipated. Stoeffler's prophetic assumption is presently being validated!

Since the value of this work is for a considerable part due to the experiential application of the truths it sets forth, let us briefly consider the experiential dimension of *De Redelijke Godsdienst*.

The Experiential Dimension of this Work

In selecting the words of Romans 12:1 as the basis for his title, à Brakel not only wished to indicate that it is an entirely reasonable matter for man to serve the God who has so graciously revealed Himself in His Son Jesus Christ by means of His Word, but he primarily wished to convey that God demands from man that he serve Him in spirit and truth, doing so in an intelligent, reasonable, and godly manner.

This brings us at once to the heart of the matter. à Brakel wrote this work for church members--not for theologians, though it was his wish that they benefit from it as well. This explains why his work is permeated with practical application of the doctrines he expounds. In a masterful way he establishes the crucial relationship between objective truth and the subjective experience of that truth. He first establishes a solid biblical foundation for each doctrine with which he deals, quoting profusely from the Scriptures. His selection of quotes is an impressive feature of this work, proving he had a profound grasp of the Scriptures. This scripturalness is rationally reinforced by his frequent resorting to the scholastic method to validate his positions.

As a man taught of God, he ably defined and described Christian experience in biblical terms. The undeniably mystical flavor of this work represents biblical mysticism at its best--a Spirit-wrought mysticism that fully harmonizes with the Spirit-inspired Scriptures. This explains at once why Jesus Christ truly has the preeminence in this work. It is the Logos, Jesus Christ, who is the very marrow of God's Word and every doctrine contained in it. It is therefore self-evident that in the subjective experience of this Word, Jesus Christ also has the preeminence. No wonder then that this work brims with references to Him whom the Father has given a name above every name. For à Brakel the name of Jesus is sweeter than honey; you can almost sense the inner stirrings of his soul when he exalts Jesus as the Father's unspeakable gift to fallen sons and daughters of Adam.

The rich experiential applications found at the conclusion of each doctrinal chapter in the first two volumes make this work invaluable and pastoral. à Brakel was first and foremost a pastor who made his theological acumen subservient to the glory of God and the spiritual welfare of His church. In writing this work, à Brakel practiced what he advised all ministers to do. In chapter 28 he writes: "He [the minister] ought to use all his scholarship to formulate the matters to be presented, in order that he might express them in the clearest and most powerful manner. While using his scholarship, however, he must conceal his scholarship in the pulpit." When necessary, however, he will cause his scholarship to bear on an argument, thereby proving himself to be a qualified theologian.^{xliii}

The General Outline of this Work: The Six Loci of Reformed Systematic Theology

Even though the covenant of grace is the dominant theme and organizing principle of *De*

Redelijke Godsdienst, the outline of à Brakel's devotional systematic theology follows the order of the six loci of Reformed systematic theology, which by that time had become the accepted structural framework for the presentation of Reformed doctrine. In examining the table of contents (see appendix), one will observe, however, that approximately sixty percent of his work is devoted to soteriology. If we consider that applications found at the end of nearly every chapter in his treatment of the first three loci are soteriological in nature, we could conclude from the table of contents alone that the experience of doctrine in the heart, and the outworking thereof in one's life, is the dominant theme of this work.

Though the scholastic structure of this work as such is not as pronounced as one would find for instance in the systematic theology of Francis Turretin, à Brakel's doctrinal chapters do have a scholastic flavor, as he uses the polemical objection/rebuttal and question/answer approach to bring important issues into focus. He uses this approach especially to define the truth sharply against the background of the frontburner issues of his day: Cocceianism, Labadism, and Roman Catholicism. Even when he uses this approach, however, one cannot help but detect the beating of a pastoral heart in the answers he gives. His overriding goal is to edify and build up the saints in their most holy faith.

This possibly explains why à Brakel uncharacteristically deals with ecclesiology before soteriology. Against the background of the Labadistic controversy and the pernicious influence of Anabaptism, à Brakel was leery of the individualism, unbiblical mysticism, and denial of the organic nature of the church that was infecting the Reformed Church of the Netherlands. This, along with the covenantal theme of *De Redelijke Godsdienst*, may have motivated him to define the church in Biblical terms as the divine organism in which the Spirit applies the work of Christ, thereby adding living stones to His spiritual temple. This prominence of the church in the divine operations in the hearts of men appears to be implied in the words of Psalm 87 that the Lord loves the gates of Zion more than the individual dwellings of Jacob. Strange and unbiblical practices prevailed in à Brakel's days, making the doctrine of the church a matter of paramount importance to him. à Brakel was first and foremost a pastor, and this makes it rather likely that he made theological considerations subservient to pastoral concerns.^{xliv}

This pastoral and practical dimension of his work we shall now examine more closely by considering selected quotations from some of the major subjects he addresses in *The Christian's Reasonable Service*.

2. Theology Proper

Revelation

General Revelation -- The Book of Nature

From the outset à Brakel manifests himself as a Spirit-taught pastor, using every available opportunity to direct the sheep entrusted to his care, and thus also his readers, to the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore he cannot conclude the first chapter which deals with general revelation until he urges his readers to seek God by way of His special revelation of Himself in the face of Jesus Christ.

Special Revelation -- The Holy Scriptures

The treatment of the doctrine of Scripture is not merely a dogmatic and academic exercise for à Brakel. His explicit goal is that his readers might read the Scriptures in a God-glorifying and edifying manner, so that spiritual growth and prosperity might result. For this purpose he gives directions which are practical and to the point:

The eunuch read while riding in his chariot (Acts 8:28). The Bereans searched the Scriptures daily (Acts 17:11). How everyone ought to practice this in private, prior to going to work, both by himself alone, and with his family! At noon when one nourishes his body, he ought also to nourish his soul. In the evening after work, one must end the day by seeking some refreshment from the Word of God. In the meantime, while engaged in his occupation, by meditating upon what has been read, the soul will maintain communion with God. He will be enabled to understand the spiritual meaning as well as to experience the power of God's Word. This will cause the soul to grow in grace, protect against vain thoughts, control the tongue, suppress corruptions, and direct man to fear God

The Divine Being

As à Brakel sets forth the fountain of all theology, the glorious Being of God Himself, his evident desire is that his readers might worship the God of theology. Again he stresses the necessity of knowing God in Christ, in whom alone the Father has revealed Himself to the children of men as a gracious and merciful God.

It is essential that one considers God to be His God in Christ. The light of the knowledge of the glory of God is to be found in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6). Outside of Christ, God is a terror, and can only be viewed as a consuming fire. In Christ, however, one may have liberty; and God reveals Himself to such who approach unto Him in that way. The one will be able to better endure the light of God's countenance, rejoice in it, and therein glorify God. One ought to be cautious, however, of becoming too free and irreverent when considering God as Father in Christ and in the contemplation of His perfections which are unveiled by means of the covenant of grace. The proper frame for contemplation upon God is to be humble, reverent, and to tremble with awe before the majesty of the Lord.

In stressing the necessity of knowing God in Christ, à Brakel stresses the Trinitarian context of this revelation. The God who reveals Himself in the face of Jesus Christ and with whom sinners are reconciled is a Triune God. à Brakel makes it very plain, however, that though the doctrine of the Trinity is a deep mystery of which we can but perceive "an obscure glimmer," the purpose of its revelation is not a mystery. Consequently, he gives this advice:

Behold, must you not admit that faith in the Holy Trinity is profitable? Is it not the only foundation of a truly godly life and the fountain of all comfort? Therefore, consider God as being one in essence and existing in three Persons. Take notice of the operation of each Person in the administration of the covenant of grace, especially as it occurs within you. If you may entertain appropriate thoughts, make appropriate comments, and have appropriate exercises concerning each Person of the Trinity, you will experience considerable and consistent progress in godliness. There will be a wondrous illumination concerning the unity of the Godhead as you consider each individual Person, and of the Godhead in its Trinity as you contemplate its unity. If so much light, comfort, joy, and holiness may be derived from perceiving what is but an obscure glimmer of the Trinity, what will it be and how will the soul be affected when he may behold God's face in righteousness, and awake, satisfied with His likeness? (Psa. 17:15).

God's Intrinsic Works: His Decrees and the Covenant of Redemption

From a doctrine which many might consider beyond their grasp, à Brakel extracts useful pastoral counsel which is particularly valuable to counteract the improper use of the doctrine of God's decrees:

à Brakel underscores the steadfastness which issues forth for the believer from a proper understanding of the covenant of redemption:

The elect on the one hand need but be still and let the Lord work. They need but to open their mouths to receive, for whatever is comprehended in the articles of this covenant will most certainly be given to them. On the other hand, they must focus upon this covenant, be active in entering into the covenant of grace, and living therein, they must make it the foundation of their life. This will motivate the godly to proceed with understanding and steadfastness, neither resting in the steadfastness of their faith or godliness nor, as one is so often inclined to do, being tossed to and fro when both appear to diminish.

God's Extrinsic Works: Creation of the Universe and His Image-bearer, Man

à Brakel encourages believers to look at creation with sanctified eyes (or with the spectacles of Scripture, as Calvin puts it), and thus behold in nature the glory of the God who has redeemed them:

Observe heaven's beautiful countenance. How delightful are the distant heavenly blue, the fluffy clouds, the elegant moon, the innumerable multitude of glittering stars, the comprehensive view of the countenance of heaven; the quiet evening, the pensive night, the lovely sunrise; the sitting or walking under the canopy of a lush forest, the sweet rustling of the wind in the trees, the dimension of immensity presented by rows of lofty trees; and the immensity of a plain when viewed either from a lonely elevation or from a distant point! Here one observes green meadows filled with cattle, and there cultivated fields with either lovely, multi-colored, and aromatic growth, or delicious fruits; while yonder are mountains interspersed with valleys. Then again one walks along the seashore, and yonder one sits down by a quietly babbling brook, everywhere hearing the joyful sound produced by the voices of birds of various plumage. If a soul is to some degree spiritual, will he not be drawn towards his Creator and Father, and will it not stir up a variety of emotions within? Will he not observe more than he can possibly express, and will not such exhilarating excursions both during the morning and the evening cause him to return home joyfully with a heart filled with praise?

à Brakel also makes the doctrine of angels subservient to render comfort to God's children:

How safe God's children are! It is true that only God by His power and supervision protects and preserves His people. Thus, one may neither trust in nor rely upon a creature. Nevertheless, God uses means in this preservation, as He provides nourishment for the maintenance of life and armed forces for the protection of cities and countries. God therefore is to be acknowledged in the provision of means. And we ought to stand amazed and rejoice in the manner whereby He directs the holy angels, in that He uses such glorious creatures to preserve such minuscule and insignificant human beings. Since God has commissioned them to guard, protect, and keep the godly, one ought to be quiet and without fear, even when all things appear to be against us. "For they that be with us are more than they that be with them" (2 Ki. 6:16).

Anthropology

Man, and God's Providential Dealings with Him

As a pastor à Brakel was fully informed about the theological issues of his day. Throughout *The Christian's Reasonable Service* he addresses such issues at opportune places. This quote illustrates that he rejects hyper-calvinistic tendencies in anthropology; in fact, one cannot find a trace of hyper-calvinism in this entire work:

God thus created Adam--and in him human nature in all its dimensions, as well as all men as created in him--in such a glorious and immortal manner. He skillfully prepared his body for him and promised him eternal life. Where are they now who slander Reformed doctrine by stating that we maintain God to have created one man unto the enjoyment of felicity and another unto damnation? We insist that God created all men in Adam for the enjoyment of felicity, and that man himself is to be blamed for his damnation.

à Brakel knew from personal experience how God's children can be overcome with the fear of man, particularly for those who are hostile to them. He applies the doctrine of God's providence to exhort God's people to look beyond man and to consider that all things are governed by the hand of their heavenly Father.

Be not fearful of creatures, as they cannot initiate their own motion. It is God alone who governs and controls them. If you have an encounter with them, God who controls them has sent them. They cannot do anything but execute God's will. God obstructs them in their activity and causes them to depart again. Who would fear a sword, stick, or stone when it is lying upon the ground and does not move since it is not in anyone's hand? If it is God's will, anyone desirous to curse you will bless you; if they desire to slander you, they will praise you; and if they desire to kill you, they will kiss you. "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31). And since He is for you, children of God, why do you fear? For all your enemies it is true that it is but as if a terrifying mask conceals the countenance of a friend. "When He giveth quietness, who then can make trouble?" (Job 34:29). Therefore, "Fear not them which kill the body" (Mat. 10:28). How quiet a soul may be which, while conscious of his enemies, "dwelleth in the secret place of the most High and abides under the shadow of the Almighty!" (Psa. 91:1).

The Covenant of Works and its Breach

As pastor à Brakel knows how inclined God's children are to look within themselves rather than outside themselves to the finished work of Christ. He therefore moves from the doctrinal to the practical when he concludes his chapter about the covenant of works with the following exhortation:

Sin and its Consequences

In treating the doctrine of sin, à Brakel deals with the issue of the dominion of sin. He knows that the believer can be greatly troubled about the question whether sin still has dominion over him, particularly when indwelling corruption seems to overwhelm him at times. By way of the fruits of grace he proves that sin no longer has dominion over the believer:

Sin has no dominion when this union [with Christ] results in lively, spiritual exercises. All exercises which do not proceed from this union are deemed of no value by a converted person. All his efforts are focused on living by virtue of this union, be it in the enjoyment of this union, or in seeking after and focusing upon

this union. Such a person desires to do everything out of God, through God, for God, before God, and unto God. They are only refreshed when all their deeds "are wrought in God" (John 3:21). This union cannot be passive, for faith "worketh by love" (Gal. 5:6), purifies the heart (Acts 15:9), "overcometh the world" (1 John 5:4), resists the devil (1 Pet. 5:9), and is fruitful unto good works (James 2:17).

Acquaintance with à Brakel would lead us to expect that this shepherd of souls would not conclude his treatment of sin without pointing to God's remedy for sin--and thus direct sinners to flee to Christ, the Savior of sinners:

Now consider all this together, and take some time to meditate on how completely abominable, condemnable, and hopeless your situation is. If you are unconverted, it may be a means to stir you up to seek and to ask, "Is there yet help? Is there no hope? Is there yet a way whereby I may be saved?" If you are then directed to Jesus Christ as the way, He will become precious, and you will earnestly seek to become a partaker of Him by faith. If you are converted, the contemplation upon the state of sin, no matter what it may have been for you prior to your conversion, will make and keep you humble; it will teach you to esteem Christ highly and to make use of Him continually. It will motivate you to glorify God, this being an expression of gratitude for sending His Son to deliver poor sinners through Him and to lead them to eternal felicity.

christology

The Covenant of Grace

à Brakel was a covenant theologian. As is evident from the title page, he considered the covenant of grace to be the great theme of this work. He frequently urges sinners to enter this wondrous covenant which embodies reconciliation with a Triune God and a right to eternal life:

The One Mediator Jesus Christ

à Brakel's theology is living theology. He aims for the heart. Many times, therefore, he is actually preaching to his readers, inviting them with all the love of his pastoral heart to come to the Jesus who has the preeminence in his heart and ministry. He never tires to urge sinner and saint alike to take refuge under the wings of the one Mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ.

His Suretyship and the Necessity of the Atonement

Oh, that you were truly destitute and perplexed! Then there would be hope for your salvation, not because of your perplexity, but because there is a Surety for such perplexed ones--Jesus Christ, whose voice sounds forth, "Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Mat. 11:28). To you who are perplexed, without hope, destitute, and troubled, I proclaim that there is one Savior--a Savior unknown to the heathen. Although they know that there is a God, they do not know that there is a Savior and Surety who is proclaimed among us. This Surety calls you, invites you, and promises to save you if you come to Him. Therefore rejoice in such a blessed reality. Look outside of yourself, go to Him, receive Him by faith, and be saved.

His Two Natures

As one must consider the Lord Jesus as being very God--and thus interact with Him with awe, reverence, fear, confidence, and in a worshipful frame--one may and must likewise have fellowship with Him as man, as being our brother, "for . . . He is not ashamed to call them brethren" (Heb. 2:11). Such fellowship with Him the bride desired. "O that Thou wert as my brother!" (Song of Sol. 8:1). Since He has become our brother, we may and must have fellowship with Him as such, always viewing Him as being in such a relationship to us, "For both He that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one" (Heb. 2:11). He is flesh of our flesh and bone of our bones. This yields boldness and familiarity to bring all our needs before Him who, being man Himself, understands man's frame of mind when he suffers pain and is troubled in both soul and body. He can and does have compassion with them (Heb. 2:17; 4:15). This familiarity makes the heart tender. It gives boldness to approach unto Him, and commune with Him in human fashion as speaking to a man, commending our cause to Him, and on the basis of His Godhead entrusting it to Him. This in turn will stir up the heart in sweet love towards Him.

His Offices

The next three quotes are examples of à Brakel's soul-stirring treatment of the three offices of Christ--as well as the manner in which they function in the Christian:

You who are unconverted, if you do not give heed, know that He will not always speak to you. He will remove either His Word, His Spirit, or you, and then it will be too late. "To-day if ye will hear His voice, harden not your heart" (Psa. 95:7-8). You who are converted, know also that if you are not diligent in listening to Him, in continually beseeching Him, in expecting His answer, nor in following His counsel, He will remain silent, hide Himself more and more, and leave you in darkness. The more attentively and persistently you hear His instruction, however, the more He will reveal His secrets to you, and grant deeper insight into that which you may know already. His

Know, however, that such thoughts are earthly, proceeding from ignorance and a feeble faith. I assure you out of the Word of God that the Lord Jesus is as compassionate now as He was then, taking note of the misery and desires of man as carefully now as He did then. Therefore, also now one may speak to Him as freely and familiarly as then. It grieves me that one does injury to the compassion of the Lord Jesus. Oh, that one would know Him as He is! How many a weak believer would then have bold access, pour out his heart with tears and supplications, and have confidence that He would help!

His States

In urging believers to meditate on the states of Christ, it is the pastoral objective of à Brakel that meditation upon His humiliation might lead to the mortification of the old man, and that meditation upon His exaltation might lead to the quickening of the new man:

There is nothing more delightful for a child of God than to behold Jesus. It is God's desire that His children be joyful, for He frequently exhorts them to this, promising that He will meet "him that rejoiceth" (Isa. 64:5). There is nothing in which they find more inward and consistent joy, than in beholding the glorified Jesus. Therefore let your meditations of Him be sweet.

5. ecclesiology

The Church as the Body of Jesus Christ

In the following quotes à Brakel defines the purpose of the Church, as well as the need for the exercise of communion of saints for the proper functioning of body of Christ:

The primary purpose of the church's existence is the glorification of God. Since the church is the kingdom of heaven, the people of God have God as their Father and the Lord Jesus as their king, so the glory of God can be observed when these people live in the love and fear of God. This is true when they are obedient to Him as their Lord, trust in Him as the almighty and faithful One, and live pure and holy lives personally among each other and towards others. The Lord's name is desecrated, however, when this people who are called after His Name do not conduct themselves accordingly. It is the Lord's will that His Name be hallowed by the coming of His kingdom (Mat. 6:9-10). He has formed that people to show forth His praise (Isa. 43:21); to show forth the praises of Him who hath called them (1 Pet. 2:9); to be to the glory of Christ (2 Cor. 8:23).

The Government of the Church

The Offices of Christ as Represented in His Church

As stated in the historical overview, à Brakel was a passionate opponent of Erastianism in the church--the intrusion of the civil government in the government of the church:

No kingdom, republic, home, or society can exist without order. This is also true for the church. God is a God of order, and it is His will that all things be done honestly and orderly. The Lord Jesus is the only and all-sufficient Head of the church--her only Lord, only Master, only Bridegroom, only Mediator, and only Foundation. Since the Lord Jesus is very God, He does not need the help of men to gather and govern His church. As it is the Lord's common way to govern and direct all things mediately, however, thereby manifesting His wisdom and goodness, the Lord Jesus likewise deals with His church in all aspects by means of men. For this purpose He has appointed shepherds, teachers, elders, governing bodies, ministers, etc., to serve in His church.

The Execution of These Offices

It behooves every minister, elder, and deacon to read the chapters dealing with the offices of the church. Not only does à Brakel give clear direction in regard to the execution of these offices, but he also calls to serious self-examination:

In the preparation of sermons they must continually review the matters they study to ascertain whether it is their objective to say something whereby they will acquire the reputation of being scholarly and gifted, thereby drawing crowds. How such strange fire upon the altar of the Lord ought to be abhorred! Their only objective ought to be the faithful use of this key: to discover to every person his spiritual state, and thereupon proclaim either salvation or condemnation to them, so that an unconverted person may repent

and a gracious soul may be comforted and stirred up.

6. *soteriology*

Regeneration, Faith, and Justification

In ministering to his sheep, à Brakel encountered a common concern: How do I know that my conversion is in truth? He gives wonderful counsel to souls who struggle with this question:^{xlv}

No one ought to be concerned about the manner of conversion because the manner of his conversion has not been what he himself would prescribe it to be, nor agrees with the manner in which others are converted. If your conversion is a reality, all is well. Therefore, do not be unsettled as you reflect upon the manner in which your conversion has occurred, even if it is such that you have never read or heard of anything like it. The ways of God are mysterious and even in the common way of conversion one experiences something with which another is not acquainted. One must, however, frequently reflect upon all the providences and ways whereby God has led us. This will give reason for adoration, for glorifying God, and for confirmation of one's spiritual state.

à Brakel characteristically describes the life of faith as a continual fleeing to and feeding upon Christ:

They frequently, if not a thousand times, receive the Lord Jesus by faith. They always believe that their reception of Him has not been as unreserved as it ought to have been and that it has not been with sufficient clarity and sincerity; it was not as wholehearted as it ought to have been. This receiving of Him is their daily food and therefore they repeat it over and over.

à Brakel also addresses the lack of abiding assurance in the hearts of so many believers. Rather than endorsing this to be the norm, he counsels believers concerning the way in which such assurance may be obtained:

The Fruits of Justification

Having established justification to be the fruit of the exercise of faith of every believer, à Brakel continues to elaborate on the blessed fruits of this justification for every believer: adoption, peace, and joy. Characteristically, he gives explicit direction as to how the believer is to make use of these wondrous benefits:

As a child of your Father, request from the Lord all those things which are the focus of your good desires. This is the reason why the Lord does not fill His children to overflowing in this life, but permits much emptiness to be in them, so that they would make their childlike desire known to Him and beg of Him for fulfillment. Make all your needs known to your Father, that is, whatever presses you down, threatens you, and you long to have; do this as intimately as a child would ask his father. Do not then tremblingly stand from afar, but rather, as a child, use the boldness which you have received and cry out, "Abba, Father." Pray for the fulfillment of your desires with sweet childlike supplications; that will be pleasing unto the Lord.

God is pleased with the joy of His children. It is His will that they delight themselves, value the benefits, fully trust in His Word and in His promise, and jubilate, leap for joy, and sing His praises with joyful and singing lips. Cheerfulness and joyfulness are a delight to Him. "But Thou art holy, O Thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel" (Psa. 22:3-4); "Thou meetest him that rejoiceth" (Isa. 64:5). Is it your desire to do something which is pleasing to God? Is God's nearness, His presence, and your familiar encounters with Him, your desire and your delight? Accustom yourself then to live joyfully by faith

The Sacraments and the Promises

Nowhere throughout *the Christian's Reasonable Service* does à Brakel encourage false passivity. His approach is biblical: He exhorts to make prayerful and active use of the Word, the sacraments, and the promises. He understood that in His promises God stretches forth His fatherly hand to His children, encouraging them to take hold of Him by way of these promises which are yea and amen in Christ Jesus:

When you perceive your sin and your helplessness against sin, make renewed use of your baptism in order to be strengthened and stirred up, and esteem it to be the seal of the covenant in which the Lord has promised to remove the stony heart and to give a heart of flesh in its place, and cause you to walk in His ways (Ezek. 36:26). Take these and similar promises, together with the seal of baptism, and come thus to the Lord, saying, "Lord, behold, here are Thy promises, and here is the seal of the promise, that Thou wouldest fulfill them in me. I now prayerfully expect this, namely, that I, being cleansed, may walk in all purity and holiness. I believe Thy truth, I expect the fulfillment of the promises, and rely upon it.

Seek out a promise which is applicable to your situation. Consider this promise as having been made by the God of truth to His children, and that they will be fulfilled with more certainty than certainty itself. Consider that the behavior of His children (whatever it may be) will not cause God to change and nullify His promises since this given promise has been made in an absolute sense--as is true for all the promises of the covenant of grace. Their fulfillment is not contingent upon any condition from man's side, even though there are such promises regarding temporal things (as, for example, in Isaiah 1:19-20)...Consider carefully the characteristics of them to whom the promise is made; they are either expressed in the immediate context of the promise or in the condition. Compare your condition with this in the presence of the Lord and let the Lord and your conscience be the judge as to whether these matters are in you.

The Life of Sanctification

In volumes three and four you will find an exhaustive treatment of the spiritual life of true believers. In his treatment of this subject à Brakel equals his Puritan contemporaries.

Its context: The Decalogue

à Brakel discusses the Decalogue in the same context as does the Heidelberg Catechism: He discusses obedience to the law as the believer's expression of gratitude for the receipt of God's favor on the basis of the finished work of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, the believer's painful awareness of lack of conformity to this law will drive him out to Christ all the more as the Savior who has also been given unto sanctification:

Examine yourself daily by means of this law, and ascertain which commandment you have transgressed and which commandment you have observed; this will humble you. You will thereby become more careful

in the future, it will cause you to pray for the guidance of the Spirit, and Jesus will become all the more precious to you.

Its practice: The Lord's Prayer

Here is an example of how practical à Brakel was in the pastoral advice he gave to the believer who desires to engage in prayer, the breath of his spiritual life:

You must also not take great pains to express yourself fluently. It is sometimes necessary to pause for a moment--be it that the matter or the disposition of the soul requires this--and that you begin by renewal with new strength and vigor. You also need not concern yourself as to what you will say first or last; that would be more the work of the head than the heart. You also need not be concerned as to whether you repeat the same matters and words time and again; as long as it does not proceed from inattentiveness. However, you must carefully guard against the thoughtless use of the word Lord as an interjection.

Its manifestation: Christian virtues

One of the fundamental marks of the Christian is love toward the Lord Jesus Christ. In a masterful way à Brakel addresses those who fear that their love for Jesus is deficient and perhaps not real love at all. He tugs at the heartstrings of all those who love the Lord Jesus in sincerity:

Why do you go to church? Why do you turn to your Bible? Why do you so frequently seek for solitude? What do you do there? What do you seek there? Do you answer, "My Jesus is gone; He has departed; I seek Him whom my soul loveth. I mourn over my foolishness that I did not open unto Him when He knocked. There I mourn that I have caused Him to depart due to my sin and that I have grieved His Holy Spirit. There I sigh, weep, and pour out my bitter complaints. There I become discouraged when I think how others live in the enjoyment of love, how sweet Jesus is to them, that I must always stand from afar, and that Jesus hides Himself from me and does not allow Himself be found of me. For that reason I go to hear His Word if per adventure He might be there; for that reason I turn to my Bible if perhaps I might hear His voice there; for that reason I frequent the fellowship of the godly, if peradventure He might be pleased to reveal Himself in love to me there.

Its Experiential reality: The Struggles, Temptations, and Trials of the Christian Life

Not only does à Brakel teach explicitly what the Christian life ought to be, but he also understood so well how it often is in the lives of the Lord's people. Chapter 94 deals with thirteen reasons why believers have doubts about the genuineness of their faith. In this quote he deals with the complaint about deadness:

7. eschatology

Also the final chapters of *The Christian's Reasonable Service* proper are filled with practical and pastoral exhortations to "improve" the doctrine of the last things:

As much as the resurrection of the dead is a terror to the ungodly, so much is it a comfort to the godly. Believers have much sorrow in this life--also according to the body. Many have weak bodies; are full of pain; are subject to many sicknesses and mishaps; weep and cry sorrowfully; observe with sorrow the ungodliness of the world; must endure being mimicked by many; must hear the contemptuous, biting, and slanderous words of their opponents; and suffer hunger, cold, nakedness, and wrong. Moreover, their corruptible body burdens the soul and their earthly tabernacle oppresses their heart so filled with concerns. Believers, be it known, however, that your bodies in which you must now suffer so much, will

once be delivered from all sorrows. The Lord will then wipe all tears from your eyes and will change this vile body so that it may be conformed to the glorious body of Christ. Then your body will shine forth as the stars, and as the brightness of the firmament. Your eyes will rejoice in beholding your beloved Jesus and in all those glorious things which are to be seen in heaven. Your ears will delight themselves in hearing the heavenly hallelujahs, and you will join them in singing the heavenly doxologies. All that God has prepared to the delight of your body, the Lord will cause you to enjoy forever. What a wondrous exchange that will be! Therefore, in all patience suffer all that is distasteful to the body, and counteract your suffering by the expectation of glory.

He who may have such a lively expectation of glory, holding this before him, will be motivated by that hope to prepare himself for this. "Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is. And every man that hath this hope in Him purifieth himself, even as He is pure" (1 John 3:2-3). Believers, you may therefore anticipate that such glory will shortly be your portion. Thus, haste to complete your task, and be an example of godliness, faith, courage, and hope upon glory. Make this glory, and the way which leads to it, known to others and lead them along unto felicity, so that you may join the Lord Jesus in saying, "I have glorified Thee on the earth: I have finished the work which Thou gavest Me to do...I have manifested Thy name unto...men. And now, O Father, glorify Thou Me!" (John 17:4-6). HALLELUJAH

The Appendix and à Brakel's Exposition of Revelation

The Dutch edition of à Brakel's *De Redelijke Godsdienst* consists of three volumes. The systematic theology proper which we have just examined in its pastoral emphasis is contained in the first two volumes. In the third volume à Brakel addresses two subjects: first, the chronological revelation and administration of the covenant of grace from Adam until the Revelation of John; and second, an exposition of the book of Revelation. In the English edition, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, the first is included as a six-chapter appendix in volume four. à Brakel's exposition of the book of Revelation has not been translated as yet; the reasons for this decision will be delineated below.

à Brakel's treatment of the administration of the covenant of grace is both of historical and contemporary interest. The historical value of these chapters lies in the fact that they express his critical evaluation of certain elements of the covenant theology of the famous but controversial Dutch theologian *Johannes Cocceius* (1603-1669). Though Cocceius was a pioneer in the development of what is designated today as *biblical theology*, having also laid the groundwork for Reformed covenant theology,^{xlvi} certain aspects of his theology led to a head-on confrontation with the magisterial systematic theologian of the Dutch Second Reformation, *Gisbertus Voetius* of Utrecht.^{xlvii} In this conflict à Brakel, though appreciative of Cocceius' biblical and covenant theology,^{xlviii} chose the side of his mentor Voetius.^{xlix} With Voetius he rejected the tenets of the Cocceian view of the Old Testament church, some of which are:

- (1) the allegorization of Old Testament History (over against which à Brakel sets forth a very careful and narrow definition of biblical types [Appendix, chapter 1]);
- (2) the notion that the Old Testament began at Mount Horeb;
- (3) the non-binding nature of the fourth commandment for the New Testament believer;
- (4) the fathers of the Old Testament were subject to judicial guilt until the Surety had in actuality made satisfaction;
- (5) the distinction between Old Testament forgiveness (*paresis*) and New Testament forgiveness (*aphesis*);
- (6) the connected notion that Old Testament believers did not enjoy the same spiritual benefits as New Testament believers;
- (7) rather than a manifestation of the gospel, the ceremonial laws were an imposition of

divine judgment upon Israel in response to the golden calf episode.

à Brakel recognized that the organic unity and the correct exegesis of the Scriptures were at stake, and therefore went to great lengths, be it tediously at times, to expose the error of the Cocceian Old Testament hermeneutic.

However, it is à Brakel's analysis of the erroneous nature of this hermeneutic which makes these chapters so valuable in our current theological setting. Modern evangelicalism is often dispensational, which means that an erroneous and decidedly unreformed hermeneutic concerning the Old Testament (e.g. Sabbath observance, baptism, millennium, etc.) is prevalent among many evangelicals. Anyone who wishes to make a serious study of the Reformed hermeneutic of the Old Testament and is looking for biblical ammunition to expose dispensationalism and baptistic theology for what it is, would do well to study these chapters carefully.

As stated, à Brakel's exposition of the Revelation of John has not been included in the English edition. This exposition is by far the weakest and most controversial element of his work--à Brakel was a historical millennialist with postmillennial tendencies^l--and has therefore never received the abiding recognition and approbation which have been awarded to *De Redelijke Godsdienst* itself. The Dutch church historian Ypeij states concerning this exposition: "This volume is the least significant and needs to be used by the common man with prudence and with not too much confidence in the exegesis of the writer."^{li} Los concludes: "The public at large has unconsciously placed its stamp of approval on this unfavorable evaluation concerning Brakel's exposition of the Revelation of John. For, as renowned as the *Redelijke Godsdienst* is, in like manner the exposition which concludes the work has been relegated to oblivion."^{lii} This unfavorable evaluation of his exposition of Revelation led to the decision to postpone its translation to a future date.

God's Stamp of Approval

More important than human approval, however, is the historically validated divine approval *De Redelijke Godsdienst* has received. Throughout recent centuries God has owned this work to be a faithful exposition of His mind as revealed in His Word--even though this work also has its human weaknesses and inaccuracies.

While yet alive, the value and divine approbation of this work were already recognized. Abraham Hellenbroek therefore highly recommended the purchase and reading of it: "No family should be without it: the fruit which it has borne everywhere, and still bears, is extraordinary: from afar and near one hears of the the most lofty and remarkable testimonies."^{liii} This explains why during the eighteenth century, next to the Bible, there was hardly a book read more frequently than this work.^{liv}

Finally, may Father Brakel's wish, expressed in his preface, be richly fulfilled in our day: "May the almighty and good God, who repeatedly encouraged me when I had intentions of discontinuing this task and who is the Author of whatever good is to be found in this work, pour out His Holy Spirit upon all who will either read or hear this book read. May it be to the conversion of the unconverted, the instruction of the ignorant, the restoration of backsliders, the encouragement of the discouraged, as well as to the growth of faith, hope, and love in all who have become partakers of a measure of grace."^{liv}

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- ⁱ J. van Genderen, "Wilhelmus à Brakel," in *De Nadere Reformatie: Beschrijving van haar voornaamste vertegenwoordigers* ('s Gravenhage: Boekencentrum, 1986), p. 167.
- ⁱⁱ "Wilhelmus à Brakel en de Redelijke Godsdienst," *Daniel 3* (1991):7.
- ⁱⁱⁱ J. van Genderen, "Wilhelmus à Brakel," in *De Nadere Reformatie: Beschrijving van haar voornaamste vertegenwoordigers*, p. 167.
- ^{iv} F.J. Los, *Wilhelmus à Brakel* (Leiden: J. J. Groen en Zoon, 1991), p.1.
- ^v J.R. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith: Calvin, English Puritanism, and the Dutch Second Reformation* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), p. 384.
- ^{vi} W. van 't Spijker, "Bronnen van de Nadere Reformatie," in *De Nadere Reformatie en het Gereformeerd Pietisme* ('s Gravenhage: Boekencentrum, 1989), pp. 11-12.
- ^{vii} W. Fieret/A. Ros, *Theodorus à Brakel, Wilhelmus à Brakel, en Sara Nevius* (Houten: Den Hertog, 1988).
- ^{viii} W. van 't Spijker, "De Nadere Reformatie," in *De Nadere Reformatie: Beschrijving van haar voornaamste vertegenwoordigers*, p. 5.
- ^{ix} J. R. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith*, p. 387.
- ^x W. van 't Spijker, "Bronnen van de Nadere Reformatie," in *De Nadere Reformatie en het Gereformeerd Pietisme*, pp. 16, 20.
- ^{xi} The Stichting Studie der Nadere Reformatie is a scholarly organization in the Netherlands which researches the *Nadere Reformatie*.
- ^{xii} K. de Gier, "De kerk in de Nadere Reformatie-Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635-1711)," in *De Saambinder*.
- ^{xiii} F.J. Los, *Wilhelmus à Brakel*, p. xi: "Wilhelmus à Brakel zou voor de gehele beweging model kunnen staan."
- ^{xiv} W. Fieret/A. Ros, *Theodorus à Brakel, Wilhelmus à Brakel, en Sara Nevius*, p. 11.
- ^{xv} W. van 't Spijker, "Bronnen van de Nadere Reformatie," in *De Nadere Reformatie en het Gereformeerd Pietisme*, p. 11.
- ^{xvi} T. Brienens, "Theodorus Gerardi à Brakel (1608-1669)," in *De Nadere Reformatie en het Gereformeerd Pietisme*, p. 144.
- ^{xvii} J.R. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith*, p. 383.
- ^{xviii} W. van 't Spijker, "Bronnen van de Nadere Reformatie," in *De Nadere Reformatie en het Gereformeerd Pietisme*, p. 13.

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- xix J.R. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith*, p. 401.
- xx This is Stoeffler's translation of *De Redelijke Godsdienst*. When writing his work, the English translation, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, had not been published.
- xxi F. Ernest Stoeffler, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1971), p. 153.
- xxii J.R. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith*, p. 384.
- xxiii W. van 't Spijker, "Bronnen van de Nadere Reformatie," in *De Nadere Reformatie en het Gereformeerd Pietisme*, p. 14.
- xxiv W. van 't Spijker, "De Nadere Reformatie," in *De Nadere Reformatie: Beschrijving van haar voornaamste vertegenwoordigers*, p. 12.
- xxv F.J. Los, *Wilhelmus à Brakel*, p. 17.
- xxvi *Ibid.*, p. 114: "zeer ingenomen...met de practicale godgeleerdheid en de preekwijze der Engelsen."
- xxvii W. J. op 't Hof, *Engelsche pietistische geschriften in het Nederlands, 1598-1622* (Rotterdam: Lindenberg, 1987), pp. 645-646.
- xxviii Unless otherwise noted, the material that follows is largely gleaned from Dr. W. Fieret's biographical introduction found in volume 1 of *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, pp. xxxi-lxxx.
- xxix W. Fieret, "Wilhelmus à Brakel," in *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, vol. 1, p. xxii.
- xxx F.J. Los, *Wilhelmus à Brakel*, p. 31.
- xxxi In response to zealous efforts to reform church and state, Koelman had been forbidden by government authorities to preach.
- xxxii W. Fieret, "Wilhelmus à Brakel," in *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, vol. 1, p. lxiii-lxiv.
- xxxiii *Ibid.*, p. lxv.
- xxxiv F.J. Los, *Wilhelmus à Brakel*, p. 98.
- xxxv *Ibid.*, p. 117.
- xxxvi *Ibid.*, p. 100: "Zegt de gemeente uyt mynen naam, dat ik haar de waarheid hebbe gepredikt, die ik hebbe gekend; die ik hebbe gesmaakt; daar men vast op gaan kan; daar men de zaligheid door zal verkrijgen, en daar ik op sterve."
- xxxvii *Ibid.*, pp. 100-101: "Heel wel; ik rust in mynen Jezus; ik ben met hem vereenigt; ik wagt maar dat hy kome; dog ik onderwerpe my met alle stilheid."

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- xxxviii Ibid., p. 101.
- xxxix Ibid., p. 265.
- xl Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, vol. 1, p. iv.
- xli F.J. Los, *Wilhelmus à Brakel*, p. 158.
- xlii Translated by Bartel Elshout (Ligonier: Soli Deo Gloria, 1992-1995).
- xliii Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, pp. xx-xxi.
- xliv F.J. Los, *Wilhelmus à Brakel*, p. 149. Los suggests that the order of chapters and loci was derived from the dogmatic labors of Cocceius, in whose theology the covenant was the predominant theme.
- xlv See also the previous page (vol. 2, p. 238) for helpful counsel in this regard.
- xlvi Prof. Herman C. Hanko comments as follows on Cocceius's contribution as a *biblical theologian*: "Up to the time of Cocceius, the theologians of Europe and in the Netherlands were systematic theologians....In the systematizing of doctrine, however, some theologians were guilty of some exaggerations of this method. Instead of searching the Scriptures and working at careful exegesis, so that the doctrines of the Reformed faith could be developed and enriched, they were content to systematize, to analyze what was already known, to pick apart and dissect by means of endless distinctions, and to raise objections only then to show the error of the objections. "While this description is probably an exaggeration, the danger was indeed that doctrines became sterile and lacked the warmth and passion of confession and life. And, when texts were referred to, it was often by way of mere 'proof-texting'; i.e., without any solid exegesis, texts were simply used to 'prove' points. "Cocceius objected to this kind of theology and wanted something more warm, experiential, personal, practical. And he wanted to attain this by way of exegesis. He was concerned that the proof-texting that was often used did not do justice to the historical development of God's revelation in the fourteen centuries of the Old Testament time of shadows, which development culminated in Christ. For example, theologians would quote a text from the time of Abraham without taking into account that God's revelation then was not as full as in later Old Testament times and in the new dispensation. Cocceius wanted exegesis to be honest with the text in the sense that it was explained as it was meant in the time it was given to Israel. "To accomplish this end Cocceius did not write a 'Systematic Theology' but a 'Biblical Theology.' That is, he started at Genesis 1:1 and worked his way through the Bible from beginning to end in such a way that his theology followed the order of biblical books" (*Standard Bearer* 72 [1996]:15).
- xlvii Alexander Comrie, a Voetian himself but appreciative of Cocceian covenant theology, was of the opinion that this conflict was hermeneutical rather than dogmatic in nature. The basic tenets of the orthodox faith were not at stake (C. Graafland, "Alexander Comrie," in *De Nadere Reformatie: Beschrijving van haar voornaamste vertegenwoordigers*, p. 343).
- xlviii F. Earnest Stoeffler, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism*, p. 156.
- xlix J. van Genderen, "Wilhelmus à Brakel," in *De Nadere Reformatie: Beschrijving van haar voornaamste vertegenwoordigers*, p. 167.
- ¹ J. van Genderen, "Wilhelmus à Brakel," in *De Nadere Reformatie: Beschrijving van haar belangrijkste*

li Ypeij en Dermout, *Geschiedenis der Nederlandsche Hervormde Kerk* (Breda, 1819), vol. 2, p. 133: "Dit deel is het minst belangrijke, en dient van eenvoudigen met voorzichtigheid en met geen te groot vertrouwen op des schrijvers uitlegkunde gebruikt te worden."

lii F. J. Los, *Wilhelmus à Brakel*, pp. 157-158: "Het grote publiek heeft onbewust op dit min gunstig oordeel over Brakel's uitlegging van de Openbaring van Johannes zijn zegel gezet. Want zo bekend als de *De Redelyke Godsdienst* is, zoo in vergetelheid geraakt is de uitlegging, die het werk besluit."

liii F. J. Los, *Wilhelmus à Brakel*, p. 261: "Geen huisgezin behoort het te missen: de vrugt die het allesins gedaan heeft, en nog doet, is ongemeen: van verre en van naby hoort men dar van de allergrootste en opmerkelijkste getuigenissen."

liv Ibid.

lv Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, vol. 1, p. cxv.