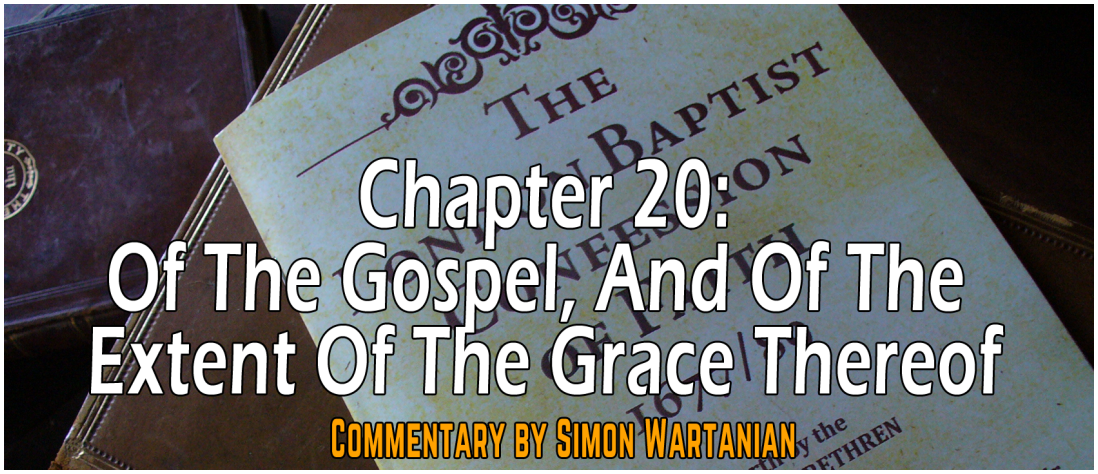
# 1689 Baptist Confession Chapter 20: Of the Gospel, and of the Extent of the Grace Thereof - Commentary

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## Chapter 20: Of the Gospel, and of the Extent of the Grace Thereof

This chapter concerns itself with the emphasis and necessity of special revelation for salvation. This chapter is absent in the Westminster Confession, but it was taken from the Savoy Declaration of the Puritan Congregationalists. Concerning the historical background, Dr. Sam Waldron writes:

> The contents of the chapter indicate that the error in view depreciated the necessity of the special revelation contained in the Scriptures for salvation. A general knowledge of the period permits the educated guess that the Puritan authors had already sensed the intellectual tendency which would later produce Deism, with its emphasis on the sufficiency of human reason and natural revelation and its opposition to supernatural revelation and the distinctive tenets of Christianity. Such men wanted to establish a completely rational basis for the existence of God and morality. They disliked the idea that a special revelation given only to some men was necessary to worship and serve God acceptably.[1]

Against such men, the Confession asserts the necessity of special revelation about God through the gospel and Scripture for salvation. The Confession acknowledges the strength of natural/general revelation, but general revelation is not enough for salvation. General revelation is enough for condemnation. The gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit are necessary for salvation. This chapter concerns itself less with "what" the gospel is than to confess the necessity of special revelation over against those who would reject special revelation and claim that they can come to salvation merely through general revelation.

## §1 God was pleased to give forth the promise of Christ

1. The **covenant of works being broken by sin,** and made **unprofitable unto life,** God was pleased to give forth the promise of Christ, the seed of the woman, as **the means of calling the elect,** and **begetting in them faith and repentance**; in this promise the gospel, as to the substance of it, was revealed, and [is] therein effectual for the conversion and salvation of sinners. **1**
    1. Gen. 3:15 with Eph. 2:12; Gal. 4:4; Heb. 11:13; Luke 2:25, 38; 23:51; Rom. 4:13-16; Gal.

3:15-22; Rev. 13:8[2]

**The covenant of works** that was given to Adam was **broken by sin** and thereby **made unprofitable unto life** (see also **chapter 6:1**). Now, it only administers its curse—death. Therefore, **God was pleased to give forth the promise of Christ** (Gen. 3:15; Eph. 2:12) as He had purposed to save the elect by Christ from all eternity. In this **promise of Christ**, the **gospel** was revealed as the **means of calling the elect** (Gal. 3:8; Luke 2:25, 38). As the **gospel** was revealed in **this promise**, God worked to beget in the elect **faith and repentance** so that they would embrace this promise, which was **effectual for the conversion and salvation of sinners** (Gal. 3:15-22). This promise of Christ was, essentially or in **substance**, the promise of the gospel and salvation, which is what Christ accomplished on behalf of the elect.

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Salvation was always through Christ, whether people were consciously aware of that or not. They were saved by faith alone and by not works. By loosely reading the Old Testament and seeing the absence of the cross, we may think that salvation was by works under the Old Testament, but now, in the New Testament era, it is by grace. This is completely false and a grave mistake. Salvation has always been by grace. The reason that this is so is because the Adamic Covenant (**see here**), which could have provided eternal life if Adam obeyed, was broken. When that covenant was broken, the promise of eternal life by obedience was likewise broken and became unprofitable for Adam's fallen and sin-cursed descendants. The Covenant of Works which was made with Adam in Eden lost the ability to give eternal life because it is now broken. That covenant did not contain provisions for atonement and now it could only administer the curse of that covenant—death. We see in Genesis 3 that just after God, the covenant Lord, confronts Adam and Eve with their sin, He likewise gives the promise of the Savior:

> Gen. 3:15 I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; **he shall bruise your head**, and you shall bruise his heel."

This is indisputably a promise of the Savior, the first one and that is why it is called the Proto-Evangelium, meaning, the first (giving-out of the) gospel. God promises a Seed, an Offspring Who would conquer the serpent, who is the Devil. At this point of time, it seems pretty vague, but as time goes by we come to know more about this Offspring and Seed. For example, Abraham is promised that in his "offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Gen. 22:18). So now we know not only He will be the child of Eve, but will also be a descendent of Abraham. From Genesis 49:10 we learn that the Offspring and the Messiah will come from the loins of Judah. As we progress in biblical revelation, we come to learn more about the identity of the Messiah. Later it will be revealed that He will be a son of David (2Sam. 7) and so forth. It is not that the original Covenant of Works made with Adam has been completely done away with, but that it can no longer give life. The only thing it administers is its curse—death—under which all outside of Christ lie. Death is the wage of sin (Rom. 3:23), that was what Adam was threatened with by God (Gen. 2:17) and because of Adam all are made sinners (Rom. 5:12).

The substance of the Covenant of Grace was revealed to all the saints before Christ. The Covenant of Grace, prior to the inauguration of the New Covenant by the blood of Christ, existed not as an established covenant, but as a promise. This is how 1689 Federalism understands Covenant Theology. For more **see chapter 7**. Believing in the coming promise of the Redeemer and believing God, was enough for salvation. The saints prior to Christ looked *forward* to Christ, but now that He has come, we look *back* to Christ. This is how Abraham was saved, the father of the faithful: "And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6). Justification has always been by grace, never was it by works! **See here** for our relevant discussions concerning the salvation of the elect under the Old Testament in chapter 11 of the Confession on justification.

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## §2 This promise of Christ, and salvation by him, is revealed only by the Word of God

2. This promise of Christ, and salvation by him, **is revealed only by the Word of God; 1** neither do the works of creation or providence, with the light of nature, make discovery of Christ, or of grace by him, so much as in a general or obscure way; **2** much less that men destitute of the revelation of Him by the promise or gospel, should be enabled thereby to attain saving faith or repentance. **3**
    1. Acts 4:12; Rom. 10:13-15
    2. Ps. 19; Rom. 1:18-23
    3. Rom. 2:12a; Matt. 28:18-20; Luke 24:46-47 with Acts 17:29-30; Rom. 3:9-20; Prov. 29:18;

Isa. 25:7; 60:2, 3

**Salvation by** Christ is **revealed only by the Word of God** (Rom. 10:13-15). It is only from the Scriptures that we know that by faith in Christ and repentance toward God, we attain to the forgiveness of sins. The message of the gospel comes from the special revelation of God and is not part of general revelation. Neither **the works of creation or providence, with the light of nature, make discovery of Christ**. General revelation reveals that there is a God, but to know Who this God is and what He requires, we need special revelation. Furthermore, those who are **destitute of the revelation by Him by the promise or gospel** cannot be saved (Rom. 10:13-15). It is by the embrace of the gospel and the revelation of God alone that we are saved.

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The gospel, unlike the existence of God, is a special revelation, meaning it is only revealed in the Bible. You cannot look at creation and conclude that God gave His only Son to die in our place! Scripture, in no place, gives any hint that people can be saved outside of Christ or without believing the work of Christ. Therefore, for those who are neither infants nor people with mental problems (**see chapter 10:3**), their end is doom. Not because they rejected the gospel, but because they lived in sin. Romans 1 clearly teaches that all people know God and they suppress the truth about that one God and seek others ways. Paul writes:

> Rom. 1:18-20 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who **by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.** 19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because **God has shown it to them**. 20 For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. **So they are without excuse.**

The reasons that they are ἀναπολογήτους (*anapologetous,* G379) is because of the fact that God Himself is the One Who has revealed Himself to all people. The things about God and His power are "plain to them" and the reason why they're plain is "because God has shown it to them." When we doubt the validity of general revelation, we doubt the power and word of God. They know God for certain, but by sin, they suppress that truth. Because of God's self-revelation in creation, they are without a defense—they are without an apologetic. This general revelation will shut the mouths of people on the Day of Judgment who never heard of the gospel. There is here not a word about people having an excuse because they never heard the gospel. In fact, at the time when Paul was writing, the majority of the living humans then had not yet received the message of the gospel. Nonetheless, Paul still declares all people to be "without excuse." They're without an excuse not because of what they do *not* know, but because of what they *do* know. They God from the created world and they have rejected Him. They will not be judged because they've rejected the gospel, but because they've rejected the God Who has clearly revealed Himself in creation. John Calvin comments on Romans 1:20—

> *So that they are inexcusable.* It hence clearly appears what the consequence is of having this evidence — that men cannot allege any thing before God's tribunal for the purpose of showing that they are not justly condemned. Yet let this difference be remembered, that the manifestation of God, by which he makes his glory known in his creation, is, with regard to the light itself, sufficiently clear; but that on account of our blindness, it is not found to be sufficient. We are not however so blind, that we can plead our ignorance as an excuse for our perverseness. We conceive that there is a Deity; and then we conclude, that whoever he may be, he ought to be worshipped: but our reason here fails, because it cannot ascertain who or what sort of being God is. Hence the Apostle in Heb 11:3, ascribes to faith the light by which man can gain real knowledge from the work of creation, and not without reason; for we are prevented by our blindness, so that we reach not to the end in view; we yet see so far, that we cannot pretend any excuse. Both these things are strikingly set forth by Paul in Act 14:16, when he says, that the Lord in past times left the nations in their ignorance, and yet that he left them not without witness (*amarturon* ,) since he gave them rain and fertility from heaven. But this knowledge of God, which avails only to take away excuse, differs greatly from that which brings salvation, which Christ mentions in Joh 17:3, and in which we are to glory, as Jeremiah teaches us, Jer 9:24[3]

General revelation is sufficient to condemn, but not to save. That is why the Confession stresses the need for the special revelation of the gospel for salvation. Men cannot be saved merely by general revelation, they need special revelation. General revelation is not able to save not because it is bad or unclear, but because that was never its purpose and it could also be distorted by sinful man. Furthermore, Christ is not revealed by general revelation, but by special revelation in the Holy Scriptures. It is true that history may tell us about Him. His ministry, His crucifixion even that some had reported that He had risen, but history cannot give us the theological explanations which we need for our salvation.

## §3 The Revelation of the Gospel unto Sinners, Made in Divers Times and by Sundry Parts

3. The revelation of the gospel unto sinners, made **in divers times and by sundry parts**, with the addition of promises and precepts for the obedience required therein, as to the nations and persons to whom it is granted, is **merely of the sovereign will and good pleasure of God; 1** not being annexed by virtue of any promise to the due improvement of men's natural abilities, by virtue of common light received without it, which none ever did make, or can do so; **2** and therefore in all ages, the preaching of the gospel has been granted unto persons and nations, as to the extent or straitening of it, in great variety, according to the counsel of the will of God.
    1. Ps. 147:20; Acts 16:7; Matt. 11:20; Rom 1:18-32
    2. Rom. 3:10-12; 8:7-8

**The revelation of the gospel unto sinners**, in **divers times and by sundry parts**, is dependent upon **the sovereign will and good pleasure of God** (e.g. Acts 16:7). It is He Who determines to Whom He grants it and how far He extends and sends it. The **revelation of the gospel** does not depend upon **any promise to the due improvement of men's natural abilities**, i.e., God has not promised to reveal the gospel to those who work hard and try the best with their natural abilities to live a good life **by virtue of the common light** which they have **received**. The revelation of the gospel unto sinners is independent of such a thought. Therefore, the revelation of the gospel rests merely in the **counsel of the will of God**. It is He alone Who determines **the extent or straitening** (i.e., restricting the scope, confining) **of it.**

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The gospel, in the period before the New Covenant, was progressively revealed to Israel until the full consummation came with Christ's establishment of the New Covenant in His blood (Heb. 8:6). God is always free to do as He wills. There isn't any obligation on His side to save any wicked sinners, but He, through Christ the Savior, has saved countless rebels and turned them into beloved children of His. This paragraph asserts the freedom of God in giving the gospel to any whom He pleases. No one in the world deserves to hear the gospel, much less be saved by believing it, therefore, God granting sinners faith and repentance is a great display of His love and grace toward man. No one deserves to be saved. If God had only saved one person and sent the rest to hell, He would have been perfectly just because that is what our sins deserve. Therefore, the giving of the gospel and the graces thereof is merely a display of God's grace and love and is dependent on His will and good pleasure alone. It is not owed to us. It is undeserved. In fact, we deserve the curse of the covenant which we broke in Adam directly from our first sin, but He bears with us for so long, displaying His patience and kindness toward us.

Concerning "The revelation of the gospel unto sinners, made in divers times and by sundry parts" see chapter 7 of the confession on the types and shadows. For types in the Adamic Covenant see here. For types in the Noahic Covenant see here. For types in the Abrahamic Covenant see here. For types in the Mosaic Covenant see here. For types in the Davidic Covenant see here.

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## §4 Effectual Insuperable Work of the Holy Spirit upon the Whole Soul

4. Although the **gospel be the only outward means of revealing Christ and saving grace,** and is, as such, abundantly sufficient thereunto; **1** yet that men who are dead in trespasses may be born again, quickened or regenerated, **there is moreover necessary an effectual insuperable work of the Holy Spirit** upon the whole soul, for the producing in them a new spiritual life; without which no other means will effect their conversion unto God. **2**
    1. Ps. 110:3; 1 Cor. 2:14; Rom. 1:16-17
    2. John 6:44; 1 Cor. 1:22-24; 2:14; 2 Cor. 4:4, 6

The message of the **gospel** is **the only outward means of revealing Christ and saving grace** (Rom. 1:16), but there is something more. It is necessary for sinners to **be born again, quickened or regenerated**. This is the **effectual insuperable** (i.e., irresistible, impossible to overcome) **work of the Holy Spirit upon the whole soul** (John 6:44, 63), which is the inward call and work of the gospel in sinners. This work of the Spirit gives us **a new spiritual life; without**

**which no other means will effect their conversion unto God**. Without the work of the Holy Spirit, there is no true conversion.

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It is indeed true that the gospel "is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16), yet that power is not alone but is accompanied by the Holy Spirit Who applies the truths of the gospel and the work of Christ to the elect. To be born again and thus be saved, it is necessary to be "born of the Spirit" (John 3:5-6), otherwise, we are still in the "flesh" and in our sin. Our Lord declares that "It is the Spirit who gives life" and "the flesh is no help at all" (John 6:63). Therefore, if God would be pleased to give us life in Christ, He will send both the gospel and His Spirit to make that work effectual in the hearts of His elect. The gospel is clear and reveals Christ, yet for the gospel to be applied to the hearts of people, the work of the Spirit is crucial and necessary. God cleansed us and regenerated us by the Spirit, "the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). Both the gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit of God, the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity, are necessary for the salvation of the elect. In this way, we see the Trinitarian work of redemption. The Father Who planned redemption and elected a people to be given to the Son. The Son Who obeyed the Father and accomplished redemption for those given to him. The Spirit Who applies the work and benefits which the Son bought by His blood to His elect. All glory to the Triune God—Yahweh.

# For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

(Romans 1:16)

## Footnotes

1. ^ *Sam E. Waldron. A Modern Exposition Of The 1689 Baptist Confession Of Faith. (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2013). pp. 302-303.*
2. ^ *Many Scriptural references have been supplied by Samuel Waldron's Modern Exposition of 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith which was apparently supplied by the Westminster Confession of Faith 1646.*
3. ^ *John Calvin. Commentaries. Taken from the TheWord Bible Software. In loc.*