

à BRAKEL'S SPIRITUALITY OF VIRTUES AND  
ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUL CARE

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Michael A. G. Haykin

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Lydia Kim-van Daalen

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## À BRAKEL'S SPIRITUALITY OF VIRTUES AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUL CARE

### Introduction

May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and virtue,<sup>1</sup> by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue.

(2 Pet 1:2-5a ESV)

Although this is not the verse<sup>2</sup> that served as the basis for Wilhelmus à Brakel's magnum opus *The Christian's Reasonable Service*,<sup>3</sup> this may well have been on à Brakel's mind as he sought to explain to normal Christians the necessity and beauty of serving God with all of their intellect, will, and affections. While on earth, people give expression to their service of God in the cultivation of godly virtues.<sup>4</sup> à Brakel, as a caring father, provides guidance to those who desire to grow in holiness and urges others who, for whatever reason, do not have this desire to

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<sup>1</sup>The official ESV translation reads "excellence," but the Greek word ἀρετή (arete) can also be rendered "virtue," see *ESV in BibleWorks* [CD-ROM] (Norfolk, VA: BibleWorks, 2003), Notes 2Pe 1:3(2).

<sup>2</sup>Romans 12:1 formed the basis for the title.

<sup>3</sup>Wilhelmus à Brakel *Logika latreia, dat is, redelijke godsdienst, in welke de goddelijke waarheden des genade-verbonds worden verklaard, tegen partijen beschermd, openbaring van johannes. 3 delen*, ed. Joel Beeke, trans. Bartel Elshout, under the title *The Christian's Reasonable Service: In Which Divine Truths Concerning the Covenant of Grace Are Expounded, Defended Against Opposing Parties, and Their Pactice Advocated, as well as the Administration of This Covenant in the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1992).

<sup>4</sup>T. Brienens, "Eschatologie," in *Theologische aspecten van de Nadere Reformatie*, ed. T. Brienens (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1993), 298 [on-line], accessed 18 December 2009, <http://www.ssnr.nl/lib/bibliopac/bin/wxis.exe/lib/bibliopac/?IsisScript=bibliopac.xic&db=BPN&lang=N&start=bpn&expression=TTL%20theologische%20aspecten%20van&action=SEARCH.htm>; Internet.

change. à Brakel (1635-1711), who was born in the Netherlands, is just being discovered by Christians in America, which in the future will hopefully lead to a wonderful contribution to Evangelical spirituality. In his own time and in his own country, à Brakel had great spiritual influence, and his influence rightly continues until today. His experiential theology is a treasure, because of the excellence with which he not only clarifies doctrines, but also presents them in such a way that they can become a lived reality in the lives of believers.

This paper will highlight one of the key components of his spirituality as he discusses it in *The Christian's Reasonable Service (CRS)*, namely his emphasis on virtues. à Brakel's exposition of virtues is unique and of great value for Christian soul care.<sup>5</sup> In order to demonstrate this, an introduction to à Brakel's life and his major work *The Christian's Reasonable Service (CRS)* will be provided, followed by an analysis of his treatment of the virtues. The paper will conclude with observations regarding the uniqueness of his spirituality of virtues and make comments and suggestions regarding the implications of it for Christian soul care.

### **à Brakel's Life**

Wilhelmus à Brakel was born on January 2, 1635, in Leeuwarden, the Netherlands. He was one of six children. His five sisters all died before they were married (except one).<sup>6</sup> From a very early age he devoted his life to God, for which his father Theodorus à Brakel, who himself

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<sup>5</sup>The link to soul care is made, because of a personal interest to contribute to this field. I believe it is also in line with à Brakel, who desires his work to be practical and applicable and to assist people in spiritual well-being which can lead to greater relational, emotional, and psychological health. In this paper, I take soul care in the broadest sense possible, namely anything from personal devotion to preaching and from informal counseling (through accountability partners or friendships) to formal and professional counseling.

<sup>6</sup>Frans Johannes Los, "Wilhelmus à Brakel" (PhD diss., Rijksuniversiteit Leiden, 1892), 24 [on-line], accessed December 17, 2009, <http://www.archive.org/details/wilhelmusbrakel00losgoog/.htm>; Internet.

was a respected pastor, and his God-fearing mother, were very thankful.<sup>7</sup> At the age of twenty-four, after a thorough education, he became minister, a task he took very seriously. In March of 1664 he married Sara Nevius.<sup>8</sup> They had four daughters and one son. Mournfully, all, but one daughter, died soon after their birth.<sup>9</sup> He was a pastor for forty-nine years, serving several congregations until his death on October 30, 1711.<sup>10</sup>

Considering the sociopolitical and religious context, à Brakel lived during a time of political, commercial, societal, financial, educational, and artistic flourishing.<sup>11</sup> However, for all those reasons, the church had become increasingly less powerful and many in the church began to long for a moral reform of the church.<sup>12</sup> The Dutch Second Reformation,<sup>13</sup> of which à Brakel was one of the divines, was born as a result. Willem Teellinck (1579-1629) is considered the father of this primarily seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century movement.<sup>14</sup> The movement

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<sup>7</sup>W. Fieret, "Wilhelmus à Brakel," in Wilhelmus à Brakel *The Christian's Reasonable Service* xxxi-xxxii.

<sup>8</sup>Sara was a godly woman with great intellect. She was a widow, her previous husband died after three years of marriage. She wrote poetry and a little book titled, *Een aandachtig Leerling van den Heere Jezus, door Hem zelf geleert, zonder hulp van Menschen*. See Los, *Wilhelmus à Brakel*, 35-37.

<sup>9</sup>W. Fieret and A. Ros, *Theodorus à Brakel, Wilhelmus à Brakel en Sara Nevius* (Houten: Den Hertog, 1988), 137-38.

<sup>10</sup>Fieret, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, xlvi-lxxix. These congregations were in Exmorra, Stavoren, Harlingen, Leeuwarden, and lastly, Rotterdam, where he served from 1683 until his death in 1711.

<sup>11</sup>Los, *Wilhelmus à Brakel*, 1-8. Los describes four time periods in the Netherlands that are related to the faithfulness or faithlessness of the Dutch people: A time of suffering: 1517-1568; A time of battle: 1568-1648; A time of flourishing: 1648-1713; A time of tergiversation and decay: 1713-1795.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>13</sup>Joel Beeke explains that the Dutch term "Nadere Reformatie" is hard to translate. Some have termed it Further or Continuing Reformation, Dutch Puritanism, or Dutch Pietism, but Dutch Second Reformation seems to be the more accepted term. The intent of this Reformation was to work out "the initial Reformation more intimately in personal lives, in the church's worship, and in society as a whole. Joel R. Beeke, "The Dutch Second Reformation," in Wilhelmus à Brakel *The Christian's Reasonable Service* lxxxv-lxxxvi.

<sup>14</sup>Joel R. Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004), 309, 370. Other important figures in this movement are, for example, Taffin, Udemans, Voetius, Smytegelt, Comrie,

was, as Beeke describes, a reaction to an increasing Rationalism, a decline in godliness, and influenced by movements such as “English Puritanism, German Pietism, the Genevan Reform, and native Dutch influences (e.g., medieval mysticism, the *Devotio Moderna*, and Anabaptism – each of which emphasized sanctification).”<sup>15</sup> Simon van der Linde indicates that the goal of the movement was to apply the Reformation fully to reign in the soul and in the world, on Sundays and workdays, in doctrine and in life.<sup>16</sup>

In the centuries following the Second Reformation, the movement was evaluated positively by some and negatively by others. The most occurring criticism is that the movement became too introspective leading to pietism, or too legalistic leading to a disengagement from society.<sup>17</sup> à Brakel may be considered one of its better representatives, whose “experiential theology sought a healthy balance between mysticism and precisionism.”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, as de Reuver points out, à Brakel’s the *CRS* is evidence of the fact that “Reformed orthodoxy should

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Van der Groe. Goeters (quoted in Carl J. Schroeder, *In Quest of Pentecost: Jodocus van Lodenstein and the Dutch Second Reformation* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001), 36), argues that this movement can be separated into three distinct phases; namely, a stage in which all emphasis was placed upon subjective feelings, with Teelinck and Theodorus à Brakel, a stage in which reformation of the church as congregation was emphasized, with Voetius and van Lodenstein, and a last, more legalistic stage with an emphasis on heavenly yearning and separation.

<sup>15</sup>Beeke, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, xc. For a discussion regarding the influence of mysticism see J. van Genderen, “Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635-1711),” in *De Nadere Reformatie. Beschrijving van haar voornaamste vertegenwoordigers*, ed. T. Brienens (’s-Gravenhage: Boekencentrum, 1986), 165, 188 [on-line], accessed 18 December 2009, [http://www.ssnr.nl/site/pagina.php?pagina\\_id=13.html](http://www.ssnr.nl/site/pagina.php?pagina_id=13.html); Internet.; and regarding the *Devotio Moderna* see C. Graafland, “De invloed van de Moderne Devotie in de Nadere Reformatie, ±1650-±1750,” in *De doorwerking van de Moderne Devotie: Windesheim 1387-1987. Voordrachten*, ed. P. Bange [et al.] (Hilversum: Verloren, 1988), 64, fn. 26 [on-line], accessed 18 December 2009, [http://www.ssnr.nl/site/pagina.php?pagina\\_id=13.html](http://www.ssnr.nl/site/pagina.php?pagina_id=13.html); Internet.

<sup>16</sup>Simon van der Linde, “De betekenis van de Nadere Reformatie voor kerk en theologie,” in *Opgang en voortgang der Reformatie. Een keuze uit lezingen en artikelen van S*, ed. S. van der Linde (Amsterdam: Bolland, 1976), 140 [on-line], accessed 18 December 2009, [http://www.ssnr.nl/site/meta-pagina.php?voltekst\\_id=B98000720.html](http://www.ssnr.nl/site/meta-pagina.php?voltekst_id=B98000720.html); Internet.

<sup>17</sup>Beeke, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, xcvi-ic

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, ic. Precisionism refers to the legalistic aspects of the movement.

not be contrasted with Reformed piety, but that the two can coexist harmoniously.”<sup>19</sup>

The reputation of à Brakel during these times was such that he gained the respect and sympathy of many as he held high virtuous living in his preaching, his writing, and in his personal life.<sup>20</sup> He stood strong for the truth that he believed in. His voice was known in disproving Coccejanism,<sup>21</sup> Labadism,<sup>22</sup> pietism,<sup>23</sup> and Roman Catholicism.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, even though he respected the government and saw its task as supporting the church, he was not afraid to confront when he thought that the government inappropriately exercised influence in ecclesiastical matters.<sup>25</sup> Due to his great influence, and the esteem and affection that he evoked,

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<sup>19</sup>Arie de Reuver, *Sweet Communion: Trajectories of Spirituality from the Middle Ages through the Further Reformation*, trans. James A. De Jong (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 256.

<sup>20</sup>Los, *Wilhelmus à Brakel*, 17.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 10-1; and Johannes van den Berg et al. explain that the “Voetians combined a scholastic- aristotelian theology with a more Puritan way of life. . . . Like the Puritans they were precisions; their Sunday observance was very strict, and as far as possible they held aloof from worldly pomp and pleasures. . . . socially, they found their stronghold in the lower middle class. . . . With at least some Coccejans their sympathy for Cartesian thinking led to a greater appreciation of the possibilities of human reason. . . . In practical affairs, such as Sunday observance and matters of dress and fashion the Coccejians were less strict than the Voetians,” in Johannes van den Berg and Jan de Bruijn, *Religious Currents and Cross-Currents: Essays on Early Modern Protestantism and the Protestant Enlightenment*, Studies in the history of Christian thought, 95 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 215-216. Another characteristic of the Coccejans was that they “believed that prophetic types of the Lord Jesus could be found throughout the Old Testament.” In response to such an exposition of Scripture à Brakel wrote *Dauids Hallelu-Jah, ofte lof des Heeren in den achtste Psalm, verklaert, tot navolginge voorgesteld, ende verdedich*, see Fieret, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, lx.

<sup>22</sup>Labadists believed in the need of having a pure church, consisting only of true believers. The church was not of this world, which was expressed in their clothing, conversations, and in their separatism. Ecstatic spiritual experiences were part of their communion services. Against them, à Brakel wrote *Leer en Leydinge der Labadisten*, see Fieret, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, lviii.

<sup>23</sup>According to Jonathan Gerstner, some of the core tenets of pietism are that it is about the Lord and not about the doctrine and more about one’s inner life than about society. Jonathan Neil Gerstner, *The Thousand Generation Covenant: Dutch Reformed Covenant Theology and Group Identity in Colonial South Africa, 1652-1814*, vol. 4 of *Studies in the History of Christian Thought* (New York: Brill, 1991), 76.

<sup>24</sup>Bartel Elshout, *The Pastoral and Practical Theology of Wilhelmus à Brakel*, vol. 4 of *Reformed Experiential Thought*, ed. Joel R. Beeke (Grand Rapids: Reformed Heritage Books, 1997), 24.

<sup>25</sup>His sermon *De Heere Jezus Christus Voor de Alleene ende Souveraine Koninck Over Sijne Kercke Uytgeroepen* [The Lord Jesus Declared to be the Only Sovereign King of His Church] is evidence of this attitude, see Fieret, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, lxxi-lxxiv.

he was, and still is, called ‘Vader Brakel,’ that is Father Brakel.<sup>26</sup>

**à Brakel’s *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*<sup>27</sup>**

à Brakel wrote extensively, addressing doctrinal error, church-state discussions, Christian edification, doctrines, and more,<sup>28</sup> but the *Christian’s Reasonable Service* has been the most influential. Already in his time, the *CRS* was read by many of the Christians of the Dutch Second Reformation. However, its influence reaches much further as the book was translated and distributed in different countries and for subsequent generations. The secret of its success is found in its practical nature.<sup>29</sup> à Brakel wrote this book with a sincere desire for people to find and live in the grace of God, hoping that it would benefit people of his time as well as later generations, his own country as well as the whole world.<sup>30</sup> His objective was that it would provide direction to theological students, student preachers and young ministers, but, mainly, that it would lead “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.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Auke Jelsma and G. Brinkman, *Wie is wie in de mystiek* (Kampen: Ten Have, 2006), 56; Elshout, *The Pastoral and Practical Theology of Wilhelmus à Brakel*, 6; and de Reuver, *Sweet Communion*, 232.

<sup>27</sup>For the remainder of the paper, when reference is made to a certain page in *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, this will be done in the following format within the main text of the paper, for example, (1:25) which means volume 1, page 25. Furthermore, the references given in the text of this paper are, most often, just one of the many examples that demonstrate the specific statement. This will help the reader to find at least one or two examples, since references to all the evidence would be too much.

<sup>28</sup>See Los, *Wilhelmus à Brakel*, 134-63, for an extensive list and explanation of all his writings.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 258-67.

<sup>30</sup>Wilhelmus à Brakel *The Christian’s Reasonable Service* cxiv.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, cxiv-xv.

The structure of the book is in line with the six loci of Reformed doctrine;<sup>32</sup> namely, the doctrine of God, the doctrine of man, the doctrine of Christ, the doctrine of the church, the doctrine of salvation, and the doctrine of the last things. Though, at first sight, it looks like a classic work on systematic theology, Elshout rightly notes, “It is more than a systematic treatment of theology: It is *experiential* systematic theology.”<sup>33</sup> He says, “In a masterful way he [à Brakel] establishes the crucial relationship between objective truth and the subjective experience of that truth.”<sup>34</sup> This is especially evident from the introductions that à Brakel gives to each of the volumes.<sup>35</sup> The result is that this work has great potential for soul healing, as is accurately described by Ewaldus Kist, “One will find in it a presentation of his own situation, and, because of this, one will feel for the author the same trust that a patient will have towards his physician when he describes for him in detail the nature of his illness and what he suffers and observes as a result.”<sup>36</sup> There is much that can be focused on in examining *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*; yet, the remainder of this paper will focus on the virtue spirituality that à

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<sup>32</sup>Elshout, *The Pastoral and Practical Theology of Wilhelmus à Brakel*, 23.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>35</sup>This comes out more clearly in the Dutch titles of the three, rather than the English four, volumes.

<b>Dutch (titles mine, based on à Brakel’s introductions)</b>	<b>English</b>
Volume 1: Appropriating of salvation and the application of it for the elect	Volume 1: Doctrines of God, of man, of Christ
Volume 2: The nature of the life of covenant partners and what may befall them (also sanctification)	Volume 2: Doctrines of the Church, of Salvation
	Volume 3, 4a: Doctrine of Salvation Continued
	Volume 4b: Eschatology; The Doctrine of the Last Things
Volume 3: Of the Administration of the Covenant <i>and</i> The acts of God with his church in the OT under shadows, and in the NT under the fulfillment as shown in an exposition of the Revelations of John	Appendix: Of the Administration of the Covenant of Grace in the Old and New Testament

<sup>36</sup>Ewaldus Kist, *Beoefeningsleer* (Dordrecht: Blussé en Van Braam, 1808), Deel 1, Stuk 1, 4; quoted in Los, *Wilhelmus à Brakel*, 266.

Brakel displays,<sup>37</sup> a spirituality that is thoroughly Reformed and biblical in its doctrine, and practical and inspirational in its effect.

### **Virtues**

In order to obtain a right appreciation of à Brakel’s spirituality of virtues, it is important to understand several things; namely, the theological context of which the virtues are a component; the way he defines virtues, that is what they are and what he considers to be their goal; and the means whereby virtues can be cultivated. Therefore, the following four topics will be addressed; namely, the wellspring of the virtues, a definition of the virtues, the virtues themselves, and the means by which they can promoted.

#### **The Wellspring of Virtues**

The one virtue that makes all other virtues true virtues is “uprightness.” Only regenerate people, however, possess uprightness—which refers to doing everything, whether it be expressed in the mind, the heart, the mouth, through works or objectives, with regard to the truthfulness of God, Jesus and Scripture (2:245)—with which they engage in the sanctification process, which consists of both mortification of the old nature and vivification of the new (3:6, 11-16; 4:147, 157),<sup>38</sup> a view in line with Calvin and the Reformers.<sup>39</sup> Since unbelievers lack this

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<sup>37</sup>It needs to be said that à Brakel’s purpose in writing the volumes of the *CRS* is not, first and foremost, to provide a treatise on virtues. His purpose, as stated above, is to help people enter into and grow in a life of faith, in which virtuous living plays a central role.

<sup>38</sup>In comparison to many other writers, though, he accentuates vivification in greater detail than mortification, which is evident in the *CRS* because of the heavy emphasis on virtues. For example, John Owen, as one representative of the Puritans, points out that virtue is a grace that assists in the mortification of sin, see John Owen and William H Goold, *The Works of John Owen, D.D* (London: Johnstone and Hunter, 1850), 32. Richard Baxter also mentions virtues, but does not provide the in depth description that à Brakel does, but merely holds them forth as the ideal, see Richard Baxter, *Directions for Weak Christians; And the Character of a Confirmed Christian: In Two Parts* (London: Holdsworth and Ball, Amen Corner, Pater Noster Row, 1835) [on-line], accessed 18 December 2009, available from <http://books.google.com/books?id=mfJT0AnCYmgC&pg=PA42&dq=20+directions+on+how+to+grow+in+grace+>

necessary virtue, they are, therefore, unable to attain to true virtue (3:16; 3:428-29).<sup>40</sup> And, thus, virtues can only be understood for what they truly are, when placed in a soteriological framework as follows.<sup>41</sup>

Following the classical understanding of the *ordo salutis*,<sup>42</sup> à Brakel explains how salvation leads to the exercise of virtue. People are first regenerated by the Holy Spirit. This happens when God, because of his eternal love and election, extends an external call, by means of the gospel revealed in Scripture, combined with an internal call, which is God's effectual call that results in the change and sanctification of a person's intellect, will, and inclinations (2:192-95, 241, 250, and 259). In regeneration, God gives faith.<sup>43</sup> And while the objective of faith is to glorify

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richard+baxter&cd=8#v=onepage&q=&f=false.htm; Internet. Furthermore, Jonathan Edwards, who lived one century later than à Brakel, wrote *The nature of True Virtue* (Jonathan Edwards; William K. Frankena, *The Nature of True Virtue* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960) but, though a valuable work, he does not deal with many specific virtues in detail; it is rather a more philosophical work on describing the true nature of love (See for a short overview of the contents of Edwards's book, John Edwin Smith Jonathan Edwards, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema, *A Jonathan Edwards Reader* (New Haven, Conn: Yale Nota Bene, 2003) xxx), which seems to be in agreement with à Brakel's understanding of virtue's true nature. More research needs to be done in this area, though, to verify my tentative conclusion regarding à Brakel's uniqueness in Christian virtues as compared to his contemporaries.

<sup>39</sup>J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1994), 201.

<sup>40</sup>However, à Brakel does acknowledge that unbelievers can appear to be more virtuous than believers (4:144). Nevertheless, this virtuousness is not the result of habitual grace and therefore misses the defining quality of true virtuousness. (à Brakel's use of habitual grace does not seem to be Thomistic in the sense of men having something that makes them acceptable to God, but more in the sense of a "habit" of grace received at regeneration which is an enabling power, a kind of sanctifying grace that leads to actual graces (4:147), that is, the mortification of sins and growth in virtues. For these concepts see Alister E. McGrath, *Christian theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 451; and Mary C. Hilker, "Habitual Grace; Sanctifying Grace," in *The HarperCollins encyclopedia of Catholicism*, 1st ed.)

<sup>41</sup>This is further evident in the fact that the most important sections on virtues are described in the volume dealing with soteriology.

<sup>42</sup>The traditional Reformed *Ordo Salutis* consists of "Election, predestination, gospel call, effectual call, regeneration, repentance and faith, Justification, perseverance and glorification," Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, "Ordo Salutis," in *Global Dictionary of Theology: A Resource for the Worldwide Church*, ed. William A. Dyrness and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008).

<sup>43</sup>à Brakel's view of faith deserves some attention. He says that the essence of faith does not consist in

God (2:290), faith itself is necessary for man, because it is the means by which justification—that is, God’s acquitting people from guilt and punishment, his adorning them with Christ’s righteousness, and his declaring them to be his children<sup>44</sup> and heirs of eternal life on the basis of Christ’s merits imputed to believers (2:347-51)—is received (2:356, 373-76).

Justification<sup>45</sup> is of crucial importance, because it is “the soul of Christianity and the fountainhead of all true comfort<sup>46</sup> and sanctification” (2:341). True sanctification can only proceed from being justified which produces a great love and reverence for God (2:405). à Brakel distinguishes between sanctification—which is God’s work in believers that purifies them and causes them to live according to his will<sup>47</sup> (2:4)—and holiness, which, being the fruit of sanctification (3:16), is the holy disposition of the heart of a saint. Holiness, therefore, is more than just an external matter or merely consisting in abstaining from evil and in doing good (3:17), rather holy deeds and virtues flow forth from this holy disposition of the heart: “a regenerate person has the principle of life in Christ and thus also a virtuous heart—the fountain

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love or in obedience to and observance of God's commandments, nor even in trusting that Christ is my Savior or in assenting to the truth of the gospel, but rather in a heartfelt trust to be brought to salvation by Christ (2:275-78). His definition of faith is "a heartfelt trust in Christ—and through Him in God—in order to be justified, sanctified, and glorified, leaning upon Christ's voluntary offer of Himself and upon His promises that HE will perform this to all who receive Him and rely upon Him to that end" (2:295). The characteristics of faith are holiness, sincerity, activity, durability, and salvific (2:291). Faith is primarily an aspect of the will (2:278), although the three aspects of the soul—namely intellect (consisting of comprehension, judgment, and conscience/joint knowledge), will (the faculty by which we choose right or wrong), and affections—that refer to the three aspects of the essence of the image of God—namely knowledge, righteousness, holiness-- are necessarily interrelated (1:307-30).

<sup>44</sup>To read more about à Brakel’s delight in the riches of being God’s child, see 2:415-33.

<sup>45</sup>Justification, that is, receiving God’s declaration of forgiveness and assurance of being eternal heirs, is pronounced upon the first act of faith, but then continues to be a daily occurrence as Christians exercise faith in Christ unto justification (2:358, 381-91, 615) in contrast to reconciliation, which is a once for all event (2:382).

<sup>46</sup>There is comfort, because justification engenders spiritual peace, that is, peace with God, and, to a certain extent, peace with all that is created, things visible and invisible. This peace expresses itself in hope, quietness, delight, satisfaction, fellowship with God, and inner peace (2:439-48).

<sup>47</sup>Knowing what pleases God is, first and foremost, expressed in the law of the Ten Commandments (3:4).

of virtues” (4:67). And thus à Brakel can summarize the soteriological nature of virtues as follows,

A soul, whom God in his eternal purpose has appointed to be a recipient of salvation, whom the Lord Jesus has loved and cleansed from all her sins in His blood, whom he has endowed with his glory and holiness, and who has been regenerated by the Holy Spirit of God, having become spiritually alive (thus pursuing sanctification), will exercise many virtues (3:19).

The desire for and exercise of virtues are not an end in and of themselves. Virtues are a sign of spiritual growth,<sup>48</sup> the goal of which is the increase of spiritual light,<sup>49</sup> a more persistent and steadfast fellowship with God,<sup>50</sup> the ability to make use of Christ with more understanding and a greater measure of faith,<sup>51</sup> and an increased manifestation of grace (4:145-47).

### **Defining Virtue**

In summary of the above, the result of the appropriation of salvation is holiness, which is the all-encompassing virtue; that is, it is “not a single virtue, but rather, the shining forth of the image of God—being a combination of many virtues” (3:19). Important to note is that a virtue does not consist in a single act; rather it is “a propensity and disposition of the heart. . . . In their essence they [virtues] have been infused [when the soul was made spiritually alive] by God and are strengthened by way of much exercise” (3:398). As such, they are different than acquired propensities, which are complements to the natural intellect, the will, or actions and enable someone to be engaged in artistic activity (3:317). à Brakel can thus argue that if a person has

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<sup>48</sup>Spiritual growth is defined as "a gracious work of God in the regenerate whereby they increase in both habitual and actual grace" (4:141).

<sup>49</sup>"This light has an inherent warmth and ignites the soul in love, renders one fruitful, and brings spiritual truths into the soul, so that whatever is true in the Word also becomes true within" (4:145).

<sup>50</sup>"Union with God constitutes the life, joy, and salvation of the soul" (4:145).

<sup>51</sup>This means that Christ becomes the means and the end to God and to life (4:146).

one virtue he has them all, because in each virtue many others merge together (3:243). However, the degree to which the virtues are manifested varies depending on the situation and on the measure of the individual's virtuous disposition (3:244), since virtues, also called "spiritual competencies" (3:318) need to be expressed and developed. And so, with this nature of the virtues in mind, à Brakel defines virtue as "that within man which perfectly harmonizes with the will of God as presented in the law" (3:243).

As is evident from this definition, à Brakel considers the law of God as the standard for discerning what is virtuous and what is not. The law or the will of God is expressed in the Ten Commandments (3:21), which basically covers all possible virtues (3:86, 243). In his treatment of the Ten Commandments, à Brakel mentions over fifty virtues that issue forth from the prohibitions and commands. à Brakel, however, gives a detailed discussion in specific chapters of only several of the virtues. The reason why he highlights only certain virtues can only be speculated. Time and space may have been determinative in his choice. On the other hand, the nature of the virtues may have played a role; it seems that the virtues that he has chosen are characterized more by a certain attitude in life, that is, a certain state of heart, rather than by the exercise of certain deeds, which is often the nature of the virtues he has left out. Yet another possibility is that, while acknowledging that all virtues are equal and no one virtue is superior to another, he may have found these virtues to be most conducive to stirring up one's soul to delight in and practice holiness (3:242).

The virtues in the *CRS* are divided into two categories based on the summary of the Decalogue; namely, to love God above all and one's neighbor as oneself. à Brakel structures the parts of his work relating to virtues as follows: first, the nature of sanctification and holiness (ch. 44); second, the Ten Commandments (chs. 45-55) ; third, virtues originating from the First Great

Commandment (chs. 56-67)—glorification of God, love toward God, love toward Jesus Christ, fear of God, obedience toward God, hope in God, spiritual strength or courage, the profession of Christ and his truth, contentment, self-denial, patience and uprightness—fourth, means to grow in faith/virtues (chs. 68-81); fifth, virtues originating from the Second Great Commandment (chs. 82-88)—love for one’s neighbor, humility, meekness, peaceableness, diligence, compassion, prudence; sixth, a discussion of spiritual growth and of seasons and reasons regarding a standstill or backsliding in spiritual growth (chs. 89-98), followed by a chapter on the perseverance of the saints (ch. 99). Due to space limitations, this paper will not provide an in-depth treatment of the virtues; rather an analysis will be given concerning à Brakel’s general manner of discussing the virtues.

**à Brakel’s Treatment of the Virtues**

Although, as mentioned before, all virtues are equal, certain virtues require special attention and labeling (see diagram 1).

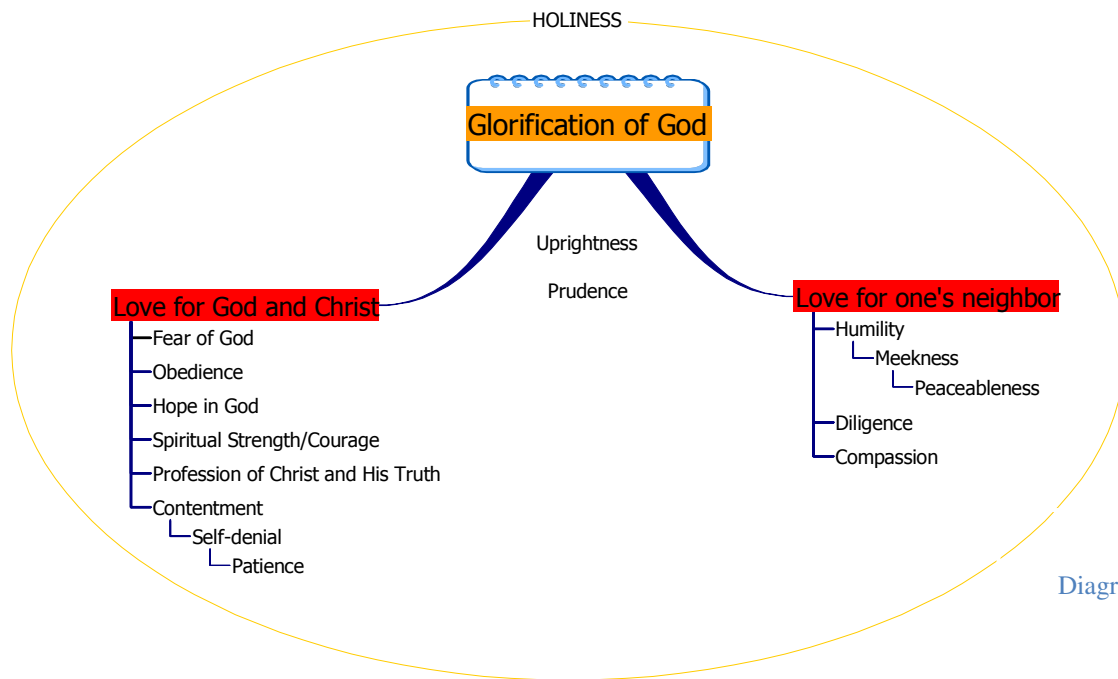


Diagram 1

This applies, first of all, to the virtue of glorifying God. This is the primary virtue and goal of all other virtues (3:244). Yet, this virtue, as well as all the others, cannot exist without two other special virtues, namely those of uprightness and prudence. Uprightness, as discussed earlier, refers to doing the will of God in truth (3:428) which makes any virtue a true virtue. Prudence, on the other hand, is to the exercise of virtues, what a rudder is to a ship (4:131). It is the exerting of the intellect, “which governs him in accomplishing his intended objective by the premeditated use of suitable means” and consists of wisdom and discretion (4:129). In other words, it is a God-given ability to people by which they can devise a good strategy in view of a worthy vision they want to pursue. The last virtue that merits special mentioning is love. All virtues being equal, this virtue would rank the top of the virtues. It is “the purest of all virtues and no virtue is comparable to it—yes, a virtue is no virtue if it does not derive its luster from this virtue” (3:272). These four virtues, the glorification of God, uprightness, prudence, and love, are thus central to the exercise of all other virtues.

à Brakel has a rather systematic way of dealing with the virtues. In the introduction, he will often point out how the specific virtue might relate to other virtues. Next, he defines the virtue. In order to do so, he will frequently discuss the Greek and Hebrew meanings of the word as they are found in the Bible. This may sound distant and academic but is actually insightful and enriching. Because à Brakel truly wants people to understand the nature of the virtue, he not only provides a definition of the virtue but breaks it down phrase by phrase. In this manner, insight is gained into issues related to the virtue, such as its essence, its object and subjects, its causes and means, its goal, and its fruits. His treatment of these issues is telling of his deep belief in the sovereignty, love, and power of God, as well as of his reverence for and knowledge of Scripture. Furthermore, his discussions reveal a balanced view of the tension between what God does in

salvation and what man is responsible for.

The theoretical descriptions of the virtue are followed by a call to self-examination. This call is first of all directed to unbelievers who may have excuses or questions that prevent them from having the specific virtue. In each discussion of a virtue, à Brakel dives into the specifics of these objections, demonstrating that he is aware of and understands the reasoning of unbelievers. In order to stir the unbeliever up to faith he points out the ways they deprive themselves of God's blessings, and endanger themselves to the natural consequences of not exercising this virtue,<sup>52</sup> God's earthly judgments, and eternal damnation. He does so in a very personal and bold (to the point of offensiveness) manner.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, his love for them is apparent as demonstrated by his desire for them to receive God's blessings.

After speaking to the unbelievers, he addresses the believers. First of all, he admonishes those who have not practiced the particular virtue by explaining them how they deceive themselves, how they disobey God, and how they deprive themselves of the advantageous effects of the virtue. Secondly, he seeks to motivate all to the exercise of the virtue. He demonstrates from Scripture that the virtue is commanded, that it makes the Christian attractive, that biblical figures have exhibited the virtue, that it glorifies God and that it benefits the believer's soul. à Brakel describes the benefits and blessings of a certain virtue extensively and attractively, so that people will come to desire and practice the virtue. These benefits are spiritual, practical, emotional, and relational and paint a picture of a desirable and attractive

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<sup>52</sup>An example of a natural consequence of the absence of the virtue of diligence is laziness which leads to poverty (4:109). An example of the earthly judgment of God in the absence of the virtue of peaceableness is God's abhorrence and withholding of grace (4:96-7).

<sup>53</sup>For example, "What is to become of you who are lazy, fearful, hotheaded, foolish, reckless, brazen and bold?" (3:339), and "cruel wolves and tigers; who are as turbulent as the sea which cannot be at rest" (4:96).

life.<sup>54</sup> In order to demonstrate the benefits, he does not only use reason and experience, but he seeks to point people to the manifold and rich promises of God<sup>55</sup> in the Bible<sup>56</sup> to which a believer has access. These promises are, in the first place, and ultimately, other-worldly in that they are reserved for eternity; nonetheless, many of them are also very practical and can be received in this earthly life.<sup>57</sup> The promises of God are enjoyed by virtue of communion with Christ and lead to a life filled with much desired possessions such as (pure, holy, liberated, contented, delightful) satisfaction and joy in life (2:602). à Brakel, most likely as the result of the experiences in his own life, is fully aware that a life of holiness and spiritual growth does not come easily.<sup>58</sup> Exercising virtues is often done in the context of various God-ordained bodily and

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<sup>54</sup>Spiritual benefits are for example that God is pleased, that he is glorified (4:123), and that his love is experienced more fully (4:23). Personal benefits can be practical, for example one's speaking, conduct and silence are enhanced (4:136), there is liberty in doing one's daily work (3:440); emotional, the experience of for example inner joy, peace and comfort (4:76); or relational, the ability to avoid unnecessary conflict (4:101), to be able to help others grow and encourage them (4:64), to be loved by many, and to be easy to interact with (4:83).

<sup>55</sup>Besides references to the promises throughout *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, à Brakel devotes all of chapter forty-two, which has the title "The Life of Faith in Reference to the Promises," to these promises.

<sup>56</sup>à Brakel's description of the importance of the Word for the obtaining of promises is this, "In the Word, God presents the matter in its beauty and preciousness. In the Word, he presents the Mediator by whom the promised matters have been merited, and by the Word God works faith in the Savior. . . . All blessings contained in the promises are founded upon and confirmed in Christ, who, by His blood, has removed the partition between God and man, and who, by His merits, had merited salvation for the elect. "For all the promises of God in Him are yea, and in Him Amen" (2 Cor 1:20)" (3:322-23).

<sup>57</sup>Examples of promises for life on earth are, for example, immediate deliverance (2:617), answered prayers (4:88), experience of joy (4:88), and material provision (4:110). Promises must be used in the right way, however. That is, the Christian must have firm faith in God who makes the promises; she must ensure that the promise described in Scripture applies to her and to her situation, which implies that she has to know God's Word well; and lastly, besides these human efforts, she must know that, ultimately, only the Holy Spirit can apply the promise in a very personal way so that it has the desired effect (2:618-20). On pages 620-29 of volume 2, à Brakel walks people step by step through the process of finding promises that will benefit. And even more, he provides examples of specific promises for specific circumstances.

<sup>58</sup>à Brakel's understanding of the human nature of people—their self-centeredness (4:118, 119) as well as their abilities and limitations—is encouraging. He helps people to realize that despite the need to give all one can, one needs to be realistic and does not have to be disappointed or discouraged when sincere efforts fail (4:21, 24, 42, 136). His grasp of the human heart is also evident from chapters on spiritual illnesses, such as backsliding in the spiritual life of the godly (ch. 90), spiritual desertion (ch. 91), temptation toward atheism or the denial of God's existence (ch. 92), the temptation whether God's Word is true (ch. 93), unbelief concerning one's spiritual state (ch. 94), the assaults of Satan (ch. 95), the power of indwelling corruption (ch. 96), spiritual darkness (ch. 97), spiritual

spiritually trials and sorrows through which he wants to lead people to eternal felicity (2:615, 618). Only when God's people find strength and comfort in the promises of God, will they be able to persevere, and not be grieved by evil, overwhelmed by despair or deeply discouraged (2:617, 619). These promises ensure that a person is motivated to progress in the exercise of virtues, which can be done by means of many religious exercises.

### **Means to Obtaining Virtues**

à Brakel's passionate desire for people to grow in faith and holiness is evident from the fact that he not only describes virtues and demonstrates how they are of tremendous value for people, he also provides specific directions for acquiring them. And, thus, several chapters are especially devoted to particular religious exercises.<sup>59</sup> However, all throughout the CRS, and especially in the chapters on virtues, à Brakel gives practical advice wanting to assist people in the obtaining of and progressing in a certain virtue. These religious exercises are of important value for Christians today, since many of them are not used anymore with the result that faith is often experienced and practiced superficially.

As with the virtues, à Brakel does not merely set the means forth as a moral and spiritual duty, but his excellence is demonstrated in the fact that he presents the means in such a way that people see the beauty of them and may be motivated to make use of them, which reduces the risk of legalism. In addition, à Brakel gives simple suggestions and instructions regarding the exercise of the spiritual means, for example, where, when, how, and to what end they can be practiced. à Brakel devotes specific chapters to some of these religious exercises:

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deadness (ch. 98), and the perseverance of the saints (ch. 99).

<sup>59</sup>à Brakel also calls these "sanctifying duties" (3:443) or "religious exercises" (4:3, 25).

namely, prayer (the Lord's Prayer being a rule and example 3:483), fasting, watchfulness, solitude, spiritual meditation, singing, vows, and experience. Since these spiritual exercises receive special treatment, they were most likely of great value to à Brakel. The reader can read about these sanctifying duties in the *CRS*. However, throughout the *CRS*, à Brakel brings up several other means that deserve attention, and those will now be briefly mentioned.

First, à Brakel considers Bible reading to be a very foundational means to grow in holiness.<sup>60</sup> “The Word of God is the only means instituted by God to faith and conversion. . . it provides spiritual food. . . [and] comfort” (1:73). Reading Scripture is necessary in order to know what God requires concerning a specific virtue (3:255). Furthermore, the Bible presents examples of people who were characterized by a certain virtue, which may lead to motivation and guidance to follow in their footsteps (3:255, 368).

Second, reflection<sup>61</sup> is a very important means for spiritual growth. Reflection is necessary to transform a topic from mere head knowledge into experiential knowledge (1:417). Reflection has many different applications. People can reflect on the attributes of God (1:133); on their sinfulness (1:417; 4:77); on punishment (1:420); on human impotency (1:424); on a person; on the life, death, resurrection, ascension, and session of Jesus Christ (1:510ff); on spiritual benefits (3:273; 4:77) and promises (3:320-21); and on who one is in Christ (3:343).

Self-examination is a third, very broad category, which is mentioned with every virtue. Self-examination is crucial, because the motives of the heart can be deceptive keeping people

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<sup>60</sup>Chapter two offers a practical theology of the Word of God, including directions how to read it profitably (1:77-81).

<sup>61</sup>à Brakel seems to use the terms reflection, meditation, contemplation, and consideration interchangeably. This religious exercise involves things such as attentive and believing observation (1:349), letting the mind be led by the Spirit in a rather passive way (1:137), or actively making rational deductions based on a spiritual topic or Bible verse with which the person is familiar (4:27).

from the way of truth and life (3:436). Through self-examination on the topics of reflection mentioned above, a person will realize his own spiritual state concerning a topic, and will accordingly know whether and how to make action towards progress on the spiritual journey.

A fourth religious exercise is the abstaining from and undermining (3:412; 4:89, 100) of practices that hinder a certain virtue (3:275).<sup>62</sup> This equals the familiar concept of mortification. The practical follow-up of mortification is being intentional about putting things into practice that will be conducive to the successfulness of mortification.<sup>63</sup> à Brakel, as mentioned before, knows that practicing holiness is not easy. Therefore, applying the will, making a strong resolution, and being determined (3:412, 437; 4:90) are important means to be successful in the attempts to mortify the old and vivify the new nature.

A fifth spiritual exercise necessary in the cultivation of virtues is confession (3:312). Confession includes acknowledging what is wrong with regards to the individual's exercise, or lack thereof, of a particular virtue, mourning over it, confessing it, and restoring the situation through faith. Confession can also be understood in the sense of an acknowledgment of one's limitations and impotency (3:441).

Finally, à Brakel encourages engaging the affections in spiritual exercises. Emotions should not be suppressed (3:319), but they should be experienced fully in order to understand them and to surrender them to God so that God, as a Father, can have his way with the resistance, struggles, pains and tears of his children, whether it be purifying or comforting (4:423).

And thus, in the specific chapters on religious exercises and in the discussion

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<sup>62</sup>Examples of these are ignorance, partial love, infrequent communion with God, unbelief, fearfulness (1:275-76), carelessness, despondency, pride (3:346), desire for money, honor, and love (4:100).

<sup>63</sup>Examples of which are having fellowship with those who love God (3:276), engaging in spiritual battle whether one feels like it or not (3:342), taking initiative to love regardless of whether a person is loveable or

throughout of those mentioned above, à Brakel greatly encourages and helps people to grow in faith and to serve God. His way of doing this is unique for several reasons and of great importance for soul care, as will be evident from the following section.

### **Observations and Evaluation of à Brakel in Light of Soul Care**

As promised at the beginning, this paper will now present some observations regarding the uniqueness of à Brakel's work as it pertains to his spirituality of virtues. This will be combined with an evaluation of the value of his work for soul care.

To begin with, à Brakel is unique, because he stresses the virtues in a way that others have not done. Four groups will be briefly mentioned in this regard; namely, his contemporaries the Puritans, modern day biblical counselors, classical Greek authors, and the modern Positive Psychology movement. First, as mentioned earlier, à Brakel's Puritan contemporaries seem to have been more concerned with mortification than with vivification. While they considered virtues to be of great importance, generally they did not focus their attention on them nor did they define, explain or make them applicable for the believers to the extent that à Brakel did.<sup>64</sup>

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whether your heart is feeling the love (4:64-65).

<sup>64</sup>William Perkins may be what comes closest to being the exception to this statement, though not fully. And it is very well possible that à Brakel was familiar with Perkin's works, since many of his works were translated into Dutch (See, Edgar de Bruyne, "Perkins, William," in *Winkler Prins Encyclopaedie*, 6th ed., edited by E. de Bruyne, G. B. J. Hiltermann, H. R. Hoetink (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1947) One book that is of particular interest is William Perkins and Thomas F. Merrill, *William Perkins, 1558 - 1602, English Puritanist : His Pioneer Works on Casuistry: "A Discourse of Conscience" and "The Whole Treatise of Cases of Conscience"*, with an introduction by Thomas F. Merrill (Nieuwkoop: B. De Graaf, 1966). Perkins' emphasis is on a good conscience, whereas à Brakel emphasizes holiness, but the similarities between Perkins' work and that of à Brakel, regarding virtue are apparent, in that they both focus on the law as the rule for virtues, on the need of examination and confession if a virtue is not displayed (Perkins, 70); it can be seen in the way both Perkins and à Brakel try to motivate people to exercise virtue by stating that Scripture requires it, that there are benefits to be gained (77). However, also in this comparison à Brakel comes out as unique in that he deals with many more virtues (Perkins deals with clemency, temperance, liberality, justice (see p.223) and whereas Perkins talks more about the rule of the virtue and the detailed applications of it in life (e.g. temperance leads to a discussion regarding riches, apparel, food), and obedience to the rule, à Brakel delves deeper into the human heart as it does or does not exercise the virtue and seeks to motivate people more from within.

Since some biblical counselors today are becoming interested in the Puritan resources for counseling,<sup>65</sup> this different emphasis by à Brakel may serve as an aid in countering an approach to counseling that has the potential to become more moralistic and superficial in its application of mortification. This tendency is seen in a heavy emphasis on putting off the old man, whereas putting on the new is not stressed as much.<sup>66</sup>

à Brakel's description of virtues is also unique as compared to classic writers such as Plato and Aristotle. For them the goal of virtues was human happiness or flourishing,<sup>67</sup> and, though à Brakel considered this a fortunate and desirable byproduct, it was definitely not the ultimate goal. The virtues that à Brakel describes are unquestionably biblical and, as such, often not found in the classic canon of virtues,<sup>68</sup> and, vice versa, some virtues that were part of classic lists of virtues, such as pride<sup>69</sup>, would never make it into à Brakel's work.

Today, Positive Psychology, which partly bases their virtue theories on classic lists,<sup>70</sup> is finding its inroads into mainstream psychotherapy.<sup>71</sup> Though, this is an interesting movement

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<sup>65</sup>Timothy J. Keller, "Puritan Resources for Biblical Counseling," *Journal of Pastoral Practice*, vol ix no 3:88 (1988).

<sup>66</sup>Two examples of biblical counseling books with a heavy emphasis on a "simple" putting off (mortification) and putting on are, Adam Pulaski, *Biblical Counseling Manual : A Self Help Counseling Program Guide* (Victoria, B.C.: Trafford, 2004); and Jay Edward Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual : the Practice of Nouthetic Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973).

<sup>67</sup>Thomas, and R. E. Houser Thomas, *The Cardinal Virtues: Aquinas, Albert, and Philip the Chancellor* (Toronto: Pontifical Inst. of Mediaeval Studies, 2004), 13. Plato, and Robin Waterfield, *Gorgias* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), xxxii.

<sup>68</sup>Walter T. Wilson, *The Mysteries of Righteousness: The Literary Composition and Genre of the Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1994), 42-46.

<sup>69</sup>Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2004), 170.

<sup>70</sup>Christopher Peterson & Martin E. P. Seligman, *Character, Strengths and Virtues* (Oxford: University Press, 2004), 46.

<sup>71</sup>Wayne Weiten, *Psychology: Themes & Variations* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning, 2010), 630.

deserving attention, the goal of virtuous living is again defined in terms of personal fulfillment.<sup>72</sup> While its list of virtues is admirable, it lacks a distinct Christ-centered orientation as the compilers of this list seek to be cross-cultural, cross-religion and cross-time in their cataloguing of the virtues.<sup>73</sup> The positive psychotherapy that has emerged as a result of the positive psychology—even if interesting and potentially even helpful in the advice and scientific support they provide regarding the implementation of virtues<sup>74</sup>—is seemingly more behavioral in its interventions, and consequently misses the holistic dimension that à Brakel provides.

à Brakel is, secondly, unique in that he knows how to bring balance in certain theologically important areas. For example, à Brakel reveals a careful dealing with the seriousness of sin, as well as with human abilities and limitations. He calls sin for what it is and addresses people in a confrontational way with the gravity of their sinfulness. Yet, at the same time, his ability to comprehend human nature, its thoughts, actions, and emotions, leads to the communication of compassion, understanding, and care. à Brakel contributes in this way to Christian counseling in demonstrating that sins are of great importance and need to be addressed, while simultaneously being fully aware of and compassionately addressing the weaknesses of human life. A healthy balance between admonishing and comforting/encouraging is thus established.

Another area where à Brakel demonstrates balance is in his experiential theology. The danger of an experiential theology is that it can become either abstract and legalistic, as it describes laws for godly life based on Scriptural truth, or it can become the opposite, namely

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<sup>72</sup>Peterson and Seligman, *Character, Strengths and Virtues*, 18.

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, 28-30.

<sup>74</sup>See for example, Sonja Lyubomirsky, *The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the*

subjectivistic and mystical, as it is focused on union with God and what God, through his Spirit, does in the soul.<sup>75</sup> à Brakel demonstrates the importance of both, explaining that the basis of and progress in the spiritual life is union with God, which is, nevertheless, only to be understood and obtained by understanding the truths of God's Word rightly. Virtues, thus, have both a doctrinal component in that the definitions and objectives are only to be found in Scripture and an experiential component in that the virtues bring about a desirable inner transformation. Learning to focus on both aspects is important for any type of counseling that wants to call itself Christian.

Another closely related issue is the balance between an inward, introspective focus and an outgoing, practical focus. God's truths and blessings are never meant to be kept to oneself, they are meant to be shared. Christian counseling can be informed by these necessary two sides of the coin, namely an emphasis on both inner personal change and outward practical results. When these two components are kept in balance, the greatest measure of transformation is likely to be achieved.

Thirdly, à Brakel's work on virtues is unique because of its holistic approach. à Brakel, as well as the Puritans and Second Reformation divines, lived at a time when there was no official "psychology." Therefore, his approach to dealing with people's spiritual health is not tainted by the non-natural division of modern secular psychology with its myriad of counseling approaches, be it experiential, cognitive, behavioral, existential, or other.<sup>76</sup> With Scripture as the

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*Life you Want* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008).

<sup>75</sup>Regarding the former, à Brakel demonstrates that rules are good as long as the gospel is viewed as the only way to salvation (2:293). Regarding the latter, he is certainly opposed to pure subjectivism, as is evident from the chapter titled "A Warning Exhortation Against Pietists, Quietists, and all Who in a Similar Manner have Deviated to a Natural and Spiritless Religion under the Guise of Spirituality" (ch 43).

<sup>76</sup>Although these specific areas are worthy of exploration as together they may contribute to greater effectiveness in counseling.

basis, à Brakel suggests different kind of “interventions,” addressing many things that belong to persons being made in the image of God, such as behavior, thoughts, emotions and meaning<sup>77</sup>— anything that might be helpful for people to grow in Christian virtuous living. His approach is, therefore, enlightening for those who, rightly, seek to counsel more holistically.

A fourth area that demonstrates à Brakel’s unique treatment of the virtues is that it differs from many other systems in their attempts to diagnose people. Both in evangelical and secular resources, diagnostic systems focus mainly on the problems of a person. According to Timothy Keller, the Puritans are to be treasured for their “sophisticated diagnostic casebooks containing scores and even hundreds of different personal problems and spiritual conditions.”<sup>78</sup> Concerning a secular diagnostic system, the most widely used diagnostic manual in the world of psychology today, the DSM<sup>79</sup>, this lacks, obviously, to an even greater degree the teleological and ideological perspective that à Brakel’s work has in that it merely describes the symptoms of a disorder with no mentioning at all of a spiritual ideal. To a certain degree this is also the case with the attempt of a “translation” of the DSM categories into a biblically correct understanding of symptoms, *The Christian’s Guide to Psychological Terms*.<sup>80</sup> Although this book is certainly more explicit in the goals of counseling, the focus is still on transforming negative/sinful symptoms. à Brakel, however, is different, because he arrives at the problems from a different

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<sup>77</sup>Two important aspects of human life that à Brakel does not mention are the importance of family history and biology. These aspects are important, because they contribute to an understanding of the abilities and limitations of a person in their Spirit-led attempt to grow in holiness, an understanding which can aid in giving even more specific and applicable advice.

<sup>78</sup> Keller, “Puritan Resources,” 12.

<sup>79</sup>The newest DSM, the DSM-V, is projected to be released in May 2013, American Psychiatric Association, “DSM-V: The Future Manual,” APA, 2009, accessed 16 December 2009, <http://www.psych.org/MainMenu/Research/DSMIV/DSMV.aspx/.htm>: Internet.

<sup>80</sup>Marshall Asher; Mary Asher, *The Christian’s Guide to Psychological Terms* (Bemidji, Minn: Focus Publishers, 2004).

angle in that he holds out the beauty of an ideal, rather than describing, first and foremost, the problem. In passing he does mention some of the problems, and additionally, people may diagnose their issues by reading his work, but his main focus is on the virtues. It can be speculated that describing praiseworthy and desirable characteristics can create in people a greater motivation to change<sup>81</sup> than can a straightforward description of what is wrong.<sup>82</sup> Though the fighting of symptoms is an important aspect of any therapy, especially a Christian one—people being called to crucify their flesh—this may become a one-sided and, therefore, limited effort if there are no worthy spiritual ideals to strive for. à Brakel not only describes these ideals, he also provides practical, step-by-step guidance towards implementation of these ideals.

In the finishing of this section, this paper will present a few practical suggestions concerning the use of à Brakel in counseling. à Brakel intended his work to be read by every day Christians, which was, in fact, done with the most beautiful results ensuing.<sup>83</sup> To make the *CRS* even more usable for counseling (than it already is right now) certain thoroughgoing actions can be undertaken. First, while there is an index with topics in à Brakel's the *CRS*, which is even further developed by the translator (4:539), it would be desirable to have an additional, more detailed index that is solely counseling focused, indicating problems and solutions that people may come to counseling for. In this way, people will be able to read and practice those parts of the book that pertain to their situation.

Secondly, though initially more designed as a “self-help” book, if it may be called so, the religious exercises that are meant to help people in their growth in holiness (read virtues) can

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<sup>81</sup>Peterson and Seligman, *Character, Strengths and Virtues*, 21.

<sup>82</sup>Nevertheless, this aspect is certainly also of great importance in helping people change.

<sup>83</sup>Los, *Wilhelmus à Brakel*, 278, 281.

be reflected upon and rewritten in such a way that counselors can effectively use them with their counselees. Research could then be done in the area of the virtues and “interventions” that à Brakel suggests, resulting in potentially even greater effectiveness. In addition, this might provide a platform on which to dialogue with secular psychology researchers, especially now that Positive Psychology has come on the scene, thereby witnessing to the Christian faith, contributing to mainstream psychology and so making leeway for Christians to rightfully practice in their distinctly biblical way.

Lastly, as mentioned before, à Brakel discusses only a certain number of virtues. One could only imagine the positive results for Christian living and counseling when someone would take all the virtues<sup>84</sup> that à Brakel mentions as issuing from the Ten Commandments, and develop them in the same detailed manner<sup>85</sup> as the virtues that are already assigned a specific chapter.<sup>86</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In America newly discovered Dutch pastor Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635-1711) has influenced the spiritual life of many Christians even up until the present day. His magnum opus *The Christian’s Reasonable Service* is a wonderful example of experiential theology. This paper has sought to highlight the uniqueness of à Brakel’s treatment of virtues described in this major work. His spirituality of virtues is unique for several reasons. His choice of emphasizing virtues,

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<sup>84</sup>Especially those that indicate a certain state of the heart, a certain attitude in life towards God and others (rather than those that are more specific and rule oriented).

<sup>85</sup>And perhaps these discussions could even be more detailed by providing biological, sociohistorical, and other factors that might be of importance to the virtue.

<sup>86</sup>This could result in one of the most comprehensive diagnostic and treatment manuals ever, which could be used by professionals as well as by every day Christians.

given their definition and goals, differs from that of à Brakel's contemporaries as well as other theories regarding virtues. Secondly, à Brakel brings a much needed balance in areas like objective truth versus subjective experience, sin versus worthy ideals, high standards versus man's limitations, and inwardness versus outwardness. Third, à Brakel is holistic in providing detailed suggestions that help to cultivate virtues. These suggestions address the intellect, the will, the actions and the affections and are, therefore, effective in what they seek to do, namely guiding people towards spiritual growth and well-being. Lastly, though à Brakel is definitely aware of spiritual problems and issues of the flesh that people need to mortify, he approaches this in a unique way focusing on the desirability and necessity of godly virtues. His writings, therefore, do not only have a diagnostic effect in describing what is wrong, but they are, in the first place, theologically ideological and teleological in holding out a vision of the beauty of a life lived in service of God. Furthermore, believers are not only left with a high ideal, but à Brakel provides compassionate and practical guidance for those who seek to grow in their journey of faith and well-being. As such, à Brakel's spirituality of virtues is of great value to Christian soul care. It can be used "as is," but, as discussed in the last section of this paper, there is great potentiality for even greater effectiveness when his work is developed in more specific ways for Christian soul care. *The Christian's Reasonable Service* with its spirituality of virtues is a treasure for all who want to live their lives in the service of God.

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