

**A Brakel's use of doctrine in calling sinners to
repentance and faith**

by Jonathan Holdt

Introduction

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the 19th century Baptist preacher said “*Soul-winning is the chief business of the Christian minister, indeed, it should be the main pursuit of every true believer.*”¹ In 2 Timothy 4:5 the Apostle Paul exhorts Timothy, to not only preach the Word, but to do the work of an evangelist in order to fulfil his ministry. Evangelism and soul-winning ought to occupy the mind and heart of every minister of the gospel.

It is clear from Brakel's works that he had a great concern for the salvation of the unconverted. Throughout his instruction in Christian doctrine and practice there are numerous sections where he seeks to exhort and persuade sinners to come to Christ for salvation. From this it is evident that Brakel was more than just a theologian. He was a pastor with a heart for the lost. He no doubt preached as he wrote, pleading with and exhorting sinners of their need of Christ. We can learn from Brakel in this today.

In our application of doctrine as preachers, do we consider the plight of the lost sinner? Is the call for repentance and faith evident in our preaching? Are our appeals to sinners limited to specific gospel texts alone or are we able to drive home our appeals to the hearts of lost souls from a wide range of

¹ Spurgeon, C.H., *The Soul Winner*, Christian Focus publications 1992:5

doctrine? These are some of the important questions this essay will seek to answer from a study of Brakel's use of doctrine in calling sinners to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

To begin with this essay will focus on a general overview of Brakel's view of ministry and the importance of evangelism. Then a close look needs to be given to his understanding of gospel invitations in the context of his Calvinistic view of the sovereignty of God in salvation. Finally a closer examination needs to be given to his use of the doctrine of repentance and faith in his appeals to sinners from a wide range of doctrine.

I. A general overview of Brakel's view of ministry and the importance of evangelism.

Brakel was a man who took the calling to the office of a minister of the Word very seriously. Dr. W. Fieret wrote that he sharply condemned those ministers who performed their task only to gain honour and wealth². Brakel believed that there were five primary tasks of a minister: prayer, preaching, catechizing, visitation and the use of church discipline. When it came to preaching he believed that this was the means that God uses to translate souls from darkness to light and therefore that it was of great importance how a minister explains the Word of God. ³ In appealing to the unconverted in one of his sermons he says, "*O wretched condition – yes, thrice wretched men! Give ear, you who are spiritually dead; that is if you are able to hear. Do you not*

² Brakel, Vol I, p xxxiv.

³ Brakel, Vol I, p xxxv

*know that you are dead before God, and thus also in all your works? As long as you remain thus, death will be stamped upon all that you do.”*⁴ Brakel was thus very direct with his warnings. But he never left the sinner without hope. He then called for repentance and faith in Jesus Christ with words like this, *“do not despair, but rather look unto this living Jesus and listen to His Word. For when he called Lazarus, He also gave him the ability to hear. This Jesus is mighty to make you alive, for He is the resurrection and life itself.”*⁵ Brakel also had false professors of faith in mind and would regularly warn his congregation with examples of apostates from the Word such as Simon the Sorcerer and Judas Iscariot. He would then call for godly sorrow over sin and self-examination that the listener needs to engage in.⁶

However we see Brakel as an evangelist not only in his preaching but also his pastoring. In his catechizing he would teach on God’s dealings with souls in conversion. In his visitation he would seek to direct people’s minds to eternal matters. In the use of ministerial authority and church discipline he would seek to admonish the sinner to repent while proclaiming the forgiveness of sins by virtue of the blood of Christ.⁷

Brakel’s view of the seriousness of ministry was governed by the reality of the coming judgment day. He knew that each minister of the Word would give an account before God as to how they watched over the church. He writes that the Lord will ask the minister, *“How did you deal with souls? Are you to be*

⁴ Brakel, Vol I, p Xli

⁵ *Ibid*, p xlii.

⁶ *Ibid*, p xliv.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. xxxviii

*blamed for any of them going lost? Did you tenderly give attention to my lambs and sucklings? Or did you unjustly grieve them, slay them, and take their veil away from them? Where are the souls which, by means of your service, have been converted, comforted and built up?*⁸

One can sense the holy fear that Brakel himself had in thinking of the loss of one soul due to carelessness in ministry when he writes, *“It will be a dreadful burden to hear the accusations of misled and neglected souls: ‘You knew very well that I was ignorant and lived in sin. If you had looked after me, had warned and rebuked me, and instructed and directed me in the way of salvation, I would have been saved. Look however, you unfaithful minister, you unfaithful elder – I am now lost! Let God require my blood from your hand, and deal with you as a wicked and lazy servant.’*⁹

In considering Brakel’s view of ministry, the seriousness of the task given to him, it is not surprising to note how often and earnestly he warns sinners to repent and to trust in Christ.

Brakel however was a Calvinistic, believing in the absolute sovereignty of God in electing sinners to salvation. How did he understand the gospel call and invitation to sinners to repent and believe the gospel in light of his strong Calvinistic view of the gospel?

⁸ *Ibid*, p. xxxix.

⁹ *Ibid*, p xxxix

II. Brakel's understanding of the gospel call to sinners in the context of his Calvinistic view of the sovereignty of God in salvation

Brakel was a pastor who would time and again appeal to the sinner in his writing and preaching, inviting him to embrace Christ in repentance and believing faith. He was Calvinistic in his doctrine and certainly believed that God would save His elect.

He also believed that God uses means to bring his elect to himself. This he did by means of the external call to sinners through gospel preaching. Concerning this external call, Brakel wrote, *"The calling is a gracious work of God, whereby He invites the sinner by means of the gospel to exchange the state of sin and wrath for Christ, in order that through Him he may be reconciled to God and obtain godliness and salvation."*¹⁰

He distinguished between the external and internal call of God. He wrote, *"The one functions externally only by means of the Word, to which also the Holy Spirit does join Himself in His common operation, resulting in common illumination and historical faith. The other, however penetrates the very heart of man, powerfully illuminating it with wondrous light, revealing spiritual mysteries to man in their essential form, and powerfully inclines the will to embrace those mysteries in Christ, and to the obedience of faith."*¹¹ Thus in the external call, Brakel believed that the Holy Spirit was indeed at work even in the mind of the unbeliever with regards to the illumination of the truth - that

¹⁰ Brakel, Vol II, p 191.

¹¹ Brakel, Vol II, p 194.

Jesus is the Christ; that they are sinners and need to be saved from sin. Yet they will not embrace Christ as Saviour without the internal call of the Spirit of God giving them the grace to willingly come to Christ for salvation from sin and wrath.

According to Brakel, the fact that God alone does the saving work ought not to deter the preacher from offering Christ to all. He wrote, *“Since Christ is offered to all under the ministry, it not only follows that everyone may come and no one needs to remain behind for fear whether he is called or not; but it also follows that everyone is obligated to come to Christ and to receive Him in order to be justified, sanctified, preserved and glorified.”*

Thus Brakel believed in the free offer of the gospel to every sinner to whom was preached. He knew however that the divine work of God in the internal call of His Spirit was necessary for anyone to embrace Christ as Saviour. He said, *“...the Word alone can have no effect upon the heart of such a person, but that the Word of God must be accompanied by a powerful operation of God upon the soul...His instruction must be accompanied by the gift of repentance and under the hearing of God’s Word He must open the heart.”*¹²

Brakel very definitely opposed Arminianism. He likened their doctrinal view as that of making an idol of man’s own ability and good will.¹³ He pointed out that Scripture refutes such foolish thoughts. Yet while he opposed Arminianism and their view of man’s free will, he nevertheless believed in the free offer of

¹² Brakel, Vol II, p 226.

¹³ Brakel, Vol II, p194.

the gospel to all who would hear it. In answering the question, “*Does God call all who are under the ministry of the gospel, but who as yet are not saved, or does God call the elect only?*” he answers, “*God calls all and everyone who live under the ministry of the gospel.*” He continues by saying, “*there is a general and unconditional declaration to all, that is to him who thirsts, who is without money and who wills...*”¹⁴

While it is important then for the Calvinistic preacher to hold to the sovereignty of God in salvation it is equally important that he does not neglect the responsibility God has given to exhort all who hear the gospel to repent and believe as well as to invite all needy sinners to come to Christ and own Him as their Lord and Saviour.

Having examined Brakel’s view of the free offer of the gospel our attention will now be turned to consider his use of doctrine in calling sinners to repentance and faith in Christ.

III. Brakel’s use of doctrine in calling sinners to repentance and faith

Brakel repeatedly exhorted his hearers to repent of their sin and trust in Jesus Christ for salvation. This is a matter which the contemporary preacher needs to take serious note of. There seems to be a serious decline in the use of the doctrine of repentance in today’s preaching. According to Steven Lawson the contemporary church seems bent on presenting a non-offensive, felt-need

¹⁴ Brakel, Vol II:202-203

message, which he says is a sad departure from the model presented in Acts.¹⁵ He goes on to talk about the need for courageous as well as confrontational preaching. Lawson laments the levity and triviality in the pulpit today. He quotes John Piper who said, *“Laughter seems to have replaced repentance as the goal of many preachers. Laughter means people feel good. It means they like you. It means you have some measure of power. It seems to have all the marks of successful communication – if the depth of sin and the holiness of God and the danger of hell and need for broken hearts is left out of account.”* Lawson then uses Jonah as an example of bold preaching when he refers to his “crying out” against Ninevah and warning them of impending judgment. He writes, *“Such confrontational preaching was not unique to Jonah. From Moses to Malachi, this same strident tone reverberated in the voices of all the prophets as they issued their calls to stubborn Israel to repent. The preaching of John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus was confrontational, often calling the religious establishment of their day into account...Such direct preaching has always marked the proclamation of God’s men down through the ages.”*¹⁶

Tragically, there seems to be a popular trend toward non-confrontational preaching which waters down the gospel and fails to call sinners to repentance. Marshall Davis in critiquing Rick Warren’s book “The Purpose driven life” quotes John MacArthur who said, *“Warren does not lay this foundation of repentance in his presentation of the gospel. There is no turning away from dead works, no call to bear fruits worthy of repentance. Just*

¹⁵ Lawson, S.J., *Famine in the Land*, Moody Publishers, 2003:44

¹⁶ Lawson, 2003:66-68

believe a few platitudes, receive an unexplained Jesus, and you are assured of eternal life...The Purpose- Driven gospel is nothing more than a postmodern version of the old time liberalism, described by Richard Niebuhr as 'a god without wrath bringing men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.'"¹⁷

Chantry shares a similar concern regarding the popular practice of evangelism. He writes, *"Today, man are properly told to confess their sins and ask for forgiveness. But evangelists and pastors are forgetting to tell sinners to repent. Consequently this misinformed age imagines that it can continue in its old ways of life while adding Jesus as a personal hell insurance for the world to come."*¹⁸

Brakel in contrast to many modern preachers was not a people pleaser. He did not try to make people feel comfortable in the pew. While his writings offer tremendous comfort and encouragement to true believers, there is a tone of seriousness when he turns to exhorting the unconverted. Brakel was a preacher who clearly believed in the necessity of preaching repentance from all parts of Scripture. We need to take note of this and examine current preaching styles and methods in light of the biblical and Christ-like method that Brakel followed where sinners were called to repentance because the kingdom of God was at hand.

¹⁷ Davis, M, 2006:66

¹⁸ Chantry, W., 1989:50

As one studies the works of Brakel, it becomes evident that he is deeply concerned for the unconverted and constantly appeals to them to examine their lives in the light of God's coming judgment and turn to the Lord for saving grace. This is what the gospel preacher is called to do in reaching sinners – warn them on the one hand of the great dangers of sin and God's judgment and appeal to them on the other by the mercies of God found in Jesus Christ.

What follows below is a brief analysis of the various doctrines Brakel used in appealing to sinners to repent of their sin and trust in Christ Jesus for salvation. Throughout the works of Brakel, he will include sections under the title of "A serious exhortation to the unconverted" or similar such titles. It is these sections which deserve a more careful analysis and which will help shed light on Brakel's use of repentance and faith in calling sinners to Christ.

The covenant of works and of grace

Brakel contrasts the misery of those outside the covenant of grace with the fullness of salvation to be found for those in it. He exhorts those outside the covenant of grace with the following solemn words, "*God is a judge whom you have provoked to wrath; you are not a partaker of the Surety and His fullness, and you have no part in any of the promises. Rather all threatenings apply to you and all judgments rest upon you.*" He goes on to appeal to the blessings to be obtained in the covenant of grace when he says, "*In this covenant the fullness of salvation is to be found...it is God with whom you shall live in peace and friendship. This consists of nothing but light, love, joy and pure*

holiness, which all partakers of the covenant will enjoy both now and forever.” He then appeals to the sinner in these words, *“Why do you still hesitate? Come, make a resolution, and enter into this covenant.”* He then points to God Himself as the one making an appeal to them through his calls to turn to Him and live. The seriousness of God’s desire for them to be saved is underlined by His only begotten Son whom He has sent to sinners. He poses the question as to whether they will then reject Him who has been sent from heaven. ¹⁹ Brakel then allays the fears of any who would think that they might be turned away from God. He says, *“The Lord shall turn no one away who in truth comes unto Him through Christ...Be not discouraged, for there is hope concerning this matter. Come, for the Lord will certainly not cast you out, but will receive you.”*

The following important matters need to be highlighted from Brakel’s method in persuading sinners to repent and turn to Christ:

First, he warns the sinner about sin and its consequences. He lays upon them the guilt of their sin and the judgments of God. Secondly, he moves on to appeal to the sinner’s desire for well-being by highlighting the promises and blessings contained in the New Covenant. Thirdly, he draws attention to God’s own desire for them to be saved and finally he seeks to remove any doubts or fears of rejection from the sincere repentant sinner.

¹⁹ Brakel, Vol I:449.

Regeneration

In Brakel's exhortation to the unconverted, he calls upon them to reason with themselves on the basis of the doctrine of regeneration which teaches that all men are dead in trespasses and sins and need to be united to Christ through faith. He places himself in the shoes of the unconverted person and reasons in the first person with words such as this, "*I am separated from and live in separation from God. I am not united to Him in Christ Jesus...It is my delight to yield to my lusts and to indulge in the commission of sin. I neither know God nor know of spiritual life with God. It does not appeal to me; I do not love it; it is not my objective...*" Brakel aims here to get the unconverted person to be true to his own feelings. He wants the unsaved sinner to come to the conclusion that he is very definitely unconverted.²⁰ This reminds us of the need to help people to be truthful about themselves. Too many will sit in church spiritually dead and see no reason for conversion. It is the preacher's duty to help them come to see their wretched, desperate condition before he can make an appeal to them to seek Christ for salvation.

Once Brakel has helped the lost sinner understand that he is indeed unconverted and in need of grace, he then goes on to make use of other arguments to persuade him to repent.

Firstly, he seeks to stir up terror for the unconverted sinner who is outside the covenant of grace and excluded from the promise, "*I shall be your God.*" He says, "*There is no rest and safety for you in God; instead He is your enemy.*

²⁰ Brakel, Vol II:256

*God with His entire being, together with all creatures, is against you and will afflict you with all those terrors which cause a man to be wretched and in pain according to body and soul... Oh, how dreadful it will be for you to fall into the hands of the living God! Where will you hide yourself? Heaven above, hell beneath, your conscience within, and all creatures surrounding you will conspire to bring you into such a condition that your hair will stand up straight if you but consider it.*²¹ He moves on to boldly state and argue the next few points with the cornered sinner: that the Lord Jesus is not his Saviour; that his faith is but the same as the devils who tremble before God and as such it will not save him; that he is cursed of God; that an eternity lies before them in hell where there will be no comfort; where they will dwell without light and rest; where they will be filled without grace and hope and experience an inexpressible despair.²²

Brakel's goal here is not to drive the sinner to hopeless despair but rather to awaken them to see their need of salvation. This surely is one of the biggest challenges today within the church. There are many who have professed faith; made some or other shallow commitment to Christ but whose soul is still in terrible danger because they remain dead in their trespasses and sins. It was this that concerned Brakel as he dealt with this subject of regeneration and drove home the utter misery that awaited such a spiritually dead sinner. But he does not leave the matter there. He goes on to urge the spiritually dead sinner to seriously consider all he has said in light of the terror of the Lord. He

²¹ *Ibid*, 256

²² *Ibid*, p. 257

notes “for God does use conviction and impressions of terror as a means unto conversion.”²³

He then proceeds to answer four questions which he anticipates might arise in the sinners mind. These four questions are as follows:

1. What must I do to be saved?
2. Am I able to? Is this in the realm of my ability?
3. What counsel do you have? Is there any hope for me at all?
4. Shall I then be converted and saved if I do all this?

From this we can begin to understand the heart that Brakel has for the unconverted. He does not want to leave them in a state of spiritual slumber but awaken them to the reality of their need of Christ. He then wants to answer any questions they might have concerning their salvation that the way might be cleared for them to come to Christ.

One is reminded here of the need to anticipate questions in the hearers hearts and to seek to answer them in order to remove doubts which would keep them from Christ.

Faith

Brakel defines faith as a heartfelt trust in Christ, and through Him in God, in order to be justified, sanctified and glorified²⁴. He defines it further by saying that it is a leaning upon Christ’s voluntary offer of Himself and upon His

²³ *Ibid*, p. 258

²⁴ Brakel, Vol II: 295

promises that He will perform to all who receive Him and rely upon Him. After defining faith Brakel points out the kind of people who hear the Word of God but do not receive it in faith – those who are caught up with the things of this world; those who are overwhelmed by their difficulties and sorrows; those who think they are saved and are not; those who are acquainted with spiritual things but upon whom no spiritual impression is made whatsoever. He then calls all such unconverted people with the following exhortation, “*Come, all whom I have named and also those to whom I have not alluded; come murderers; adulterers; fornicators; unjust persons, thieves, drunkards, you who revel in sin, gamblers, dancers, you criminals who have been given over to yourself, liars, backbiters, perjurers; come whomever you may be and whatever your circumstances may be; come to Jesus, believe in Him and you will be saved.*”²⁵

Brakel’s invitation was simple and clear. It was open to all. It invited the sinner of whatever form or shape to come to Jesus; to put their faith in Him for salvation. Brakel however is one who did not neglect to make use of various reasons to persuade the sinner to trust in Christ. In seeking to persuade the sinner to come to Christ he does not by pass the mind but appeals first of all to the wretched condition that the sinner finds himself in. He strongly appeals, “*Can anything be more dreadful than to be without God, to be confronted with God as an angry Judge, to be eternally outside of heaven, to have all that is desirable and sought after here to be hostile toward you, and hereafter to be forever condemned in the pool of fire?*” The doctrine of hell and eternal

²⁵ Brakel, Vol II: 297

punishment very much features in his appeals. He continues, *“If you still remain insensitive and continue in this way, there is no hope that you will escape eternal condemnation, and with sorrow we must observe that you are on your way to hell. You are at the very edge of hell...”*²⁶ He then appeals to the sinner to seek the Lord while He may be found considering the fact that outside of Christ there is nothing but restlessness and hostility.

It is important to note from this that Brakel takes much time in preparing the ground for the seed of faith. He does not immediately call sinners to trust in Christ. He takes time to make them aware of the dangerous situation they find themselves in. Only once he has highlighted the tremendous spiritual danger the sinner is faced with, does he appeal to them, to trust in Christ. This he does by magnifying the beauty and loveliness of Christ. Of Christ he says, *“In Christ there is a fullness to meet all your needs and fulfil all your desires...In Him there is complete fullness: (1) to remove all your sins (2) to reconcile us with God (3) to deliver us from the eternal wrath of God and from condemnation (4) in Him there is fullness of Spirit (5) of light (6) of life (7) of peace (8) and of full salvation.”*²⁷ He emphasises the fact that all these blessings are to be found in Christ alone. He then points out the loveliness of the character of Christ by speaking of His omnipotence to save; His inexpressible goodness and kindness toward the soul that seeks Him and His faithfulness as Good Shepherd and High Priest. He thus concludes, *“One may*

²⁶ *Ibid*, p 298.

²⁷ Brakel, Vol II:299

*therefore entrust himself to Him, abide peacefully in Him as in a safe hiding place.*²⁸

One would think that he has said enough. Most preachers would think that they have fulfilled their responsibility in inviting the sinner to Christ. Brakel, however does not end then. He continues to drive his appeal into the hearts of his hearers by emphasizing the great wickedness of not believing in Christ. He lists several consequences of them not believing, including (1) making God out to be a liar by implying that true life is not to be found in His Son; (2) despising Christ in His friendly invitation and by (3) despising all heavenly gifts that pertain to their salvation. Having done all this Brakel informs them that they will be liable for the greatest of all punishments.²⁹

Brakel then moves on to consider certain impediments in the way of sinners coming to Christ. He deals with common problems such as ignorance; an unwilling spirit; fear; feeling too sinful; believing that ones broken heartedness is insufficient.³⁰ Thus Brakel proves to be a pastor and preacher who has carefully thought about the plight of every sinner that may be seated in his congregation. He has considered their desperate plight; their need of Christ; the great sin that would be theirs of rejecting Christ and the obstacles that there may be in their way of coming to Christ for salvation. In all this he emphasises the necessity of faith in Christ and of the immediacy of salvation for the one who believes. This is aptly summed up when he says, "*May one*

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 300

²⁹ Brakel, Vol II:302

³⁰ *Ibid*, p.303

upon being convicted and being desirous for Christ, immediately go to Christ at the very outset? Yes, you may come at once..." For Brakel, the words of the hymn by Charlotte Elliott would have echoed his own belief in the all sufficiency of Christ's blood to save the needy sinner. In this hymn she wrote, *"Just as I am, without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me. And that Thou bidst me come to Thee, O Lamb of God, I come!"*³¹

Self-examination

Brakel includes in his works a chapter on the distinguishing marks of saving faith. He is concerned for those who have a false peace regarding their conversion and thus he finds it necessary to distinguish between true and temporal faith. He begins by calling his hearers to examine themselves as to whether they are true believers or not. He appeals to them in the following way, *"Come, search yourself closely and examine yourself...Should one be careless in such a weighty matter?"*³² He points out that not all who have been baptized, who attend church and partake of the Lord's Supper are true believers. He emphasizes the importance of self-examination in that neglect will lead to a waste of time and render the means of grace useless and impotent. He points out that it is very beneficial and causes one to become conscious of the evils which dwell in the heart and to flee to Jesus for justification and sanctification.³³ He then moves on to consider the various forms of self-deceit and false foundations. He also distinguishes between temporal and true believers regarding sorrow over sin; the exercise of their

³¹ Grace Hymns, 1978: Hymn 419

³² Brakel, Vol II:308.

³³ Brakel, Vol II:309

faith and their practice of holiness. He then makes this appeal, “*Examine yourself by this, for if these spiritual frames, motions and considerations are not to be found in your heart, and if the motives mentioned do not stir you up to refrain from evil and perform that which is good, you have not been regenerated. Your sanctification is not in truth but is counterfeit. Oh that God would grant you to be truly convinced of this and that it would result in your conversion.*”³⁴ From this we learn the importance of preaching for conversion based on the biblical doctrine of self-examination. Brakel was careful in laying out all the reasons for false deceit as well as distinguishing true faith from false so as to enable his hearers to make a careful and through examination of their hearts.

Justification

Brakel defines justification not as an infusion of holiness as believed by the “Papists” but as a divine, judicial act attributed to God as our judge who either acquits man or condemns him.³⁵ He proceeds to refute various objections to imputed righteousness before he considers the means of our justification which is faith. He considers the objection raised by James teaching on justification by works and that of Paul’s view of justification by faith. He also looks at the relationship between justification and good works.

An important matter that needs to be addressed here concerns the need for a sinner to strive for justification. Brakel underlines the fact that justification is an

³⁴ *Ibid*, p 336

³⁵ *Ibid*, 344

act of God in which “a person by faith receives Christ and His righteousness.”³⁶ He points out that it is a pronouncement made toward the believer in which God is in effect saying “Your sins have been atoned for; my justice is satisfied; you are reconciled with Me; I forgive you your sins; I remit them; I do not charge them against your account; and you are an heir of eternal life.”³⁷ He understands justification as a legal pronouncement made by God in which a person is forgiven his sin and reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ.

He also seeks to answer the person who believes that since justification is an act of God there is nothing he can do but wait passively for God to do something. Brakel anticipates such a person saying, “Has not God eternally decreed whom He will justify and whom not, this being a decree which cannot be changed by man? Is it not therefore best to be quiet and await the outworking of this decree...Are not all exhortations to strive for justification in vain.”³⁸ To this Brakel responds by saying that while one must not strive to be justified by his works, he must nevertheless strive to receive this righteousness of God by faith in Christ. He must strive to receive the promises made to believers regarding salvation both from His Word and the testimony of the Holy Spirit.³⁹ This, he says, is life, joy and comfort for the soul. Failing to do this because of a wilful passive idleness will bring about condemnation. Here he says, “Tell me you despisers of grace, you who are conformed to the world and are lazy, is your condemnation not just? Will you not have to say on

³⁶ *Ibid*, 383

³⁷ *Ibid*, 383

³⁸ *Ibid*, 399

³⁹ *Ibid*, 399

*your deathbed and in the day of judgment 'I was not willing; it is my own fault; therefore woe, woe is unto me that I have been so foolish and that due to my own neglect I have now to go lost forever and be condemned.'*⁴⁰

Brakel's view of justification by faith alone thus does not negate the necessity for the sinner to pursue this righteousness through faith. In contrast to modern "easy believism"⁴¹ where the sinner is exhorted to "accept" Jesus as Saviour by saying a simple sinner's prayer, Brakel emphasized the need to strive for justification, to seek for forgiveness of sin and peace with God by appropriating the promises of the Word regarding salvation in order to "*hear the actual justifying pronouncement of God both out of His Word and by His Holy Spirit.*"⁴²

Adoption

Leading on from the doctrine of justification is the doctrine of spiritual sonship which Brakel expounds on next in his works. Adoption has to do with God not only forgiving the repentant sinner and granting him the gift of eternal life but also with adopting him as his child. Brakel considers the marks of a child of God in this chapter – that he desires the continual presence of God; that he is humble before God; that he is willing to do the Lord's will and that they love the children of God. Then he calls his hearers to examine themselves to see

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 400

⁴¹ John MacArthur in his book, *The Gospel according to Jesus*, points out that this easy-believism where sinners are urged to accept or invite Jesus into their lives, or to make a decision for Christ are the products of a diluted gospel which is not the gospel according to Jesus. He mentions that present day evangelicalism ignores the cost of following Jesus and that many are being deceived into thinking they are saved when in reality they will be lost forever. (1988:21ff)

⁴² Brakel, II: 399

whether they are truly children of God and in the light of them not being so, to reflect upon the awful condition they are in.⁴³ He then provides the sincere repentant sinner with hope when he says that this hope lies in taking refuge in the Lord Jesus and in receiving him by faith.

One can learn from Brakel the need of constantly defining to the congregation what the marks of a true Christian are before calling them to self-examination. The preacher must be careful though of not leaving his hearers in a state of self-despair, with some coming to realise that they lack to true marks of a Christian. They need to then be given hope by reminding them of the refuge and security that can be found in the Lord Jesus.

Spiritual peace and spiritual joy

Another blessing that flows from justification is spiritual peace. Brakel defines this as a laying aside of former enmity between God and man. He points out that it consists in fellowship between the believing soul and God which is characterized by oneness of heart, intimacy, friendliness and love.⁴⁴

Brakel is however aware of a false peace which many possess. He calls out to them with these words, *“You who have a peace of which God is not the focus and which you enjoy apart from being in the presence of and in communion with God... you who due to this inner peace of mind are not prompted to be on guard against all sins and to live a life pleasing unto God – I assure you*

⁴³ *Ibid*, 432-433

⁴⁴ Brakel, II:440

*that your peace is nothing but carnal peace, and that God's eternal and unbearable wrath hangs over your head.*⁴⁵ He continues with stern words by saying, *"If you presently do not come to your senses and repent, how rude will your awakening then be when it will be too late and you will open your eyes in hell!"* From such exhortations one can almost feel the passionate concern from Brakel for those living under a false sense of peace. There is a note of urgency in his appeal, a fervent longing for his hearers to be awakened from a false sense of assurance.

Regarding spiritual joy, Brakel defines it as a delightful motion of the soul, generated by the Holy Spirit in the heart of believers, whereby he convinces them of the felicity (happiness) of their state, causes them to enjoy the benefits of the covenant of grace, and assures them of their future felicity.⁴⁶ He then moves on to consider counterfeit spiritual joy which is the temporal joy of unbelievers. He deals with a possible question from one of his hearers who feels his joylessness because of his sins and who says, *"How can a person rejoice who commits as many sins as I commit?"* He answers this poor soul in this way, *"The cause and foundation of your joy must not be found within yourself and your virtuousness, but outside of yourself and in Christ... When someone's sins are a heavy burden to him and grieve him; if he then flees to Jesus and receives his atonement, and surrendering himself to Him to be justified and sanctified...he has reason for joy."*⁴⁷

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 449

⁴⁶ Brakel, II:456

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p.465

In this we can see that Brakel continues to direct the troubled sinner away from himself and his own virtues to the Lord Jesus Christ. His appeals to lost sinners would invariably point them to the only Saviour, Jesus Christ. We can argue from this that while he warned of God's wrath and coming judgment repeatedly, he never failed to exalt the Lord Jesus Christ as being the only one in whom salvation from sin and judgment is found.

The use of the moral law

In volume 3 of Brakel's works, he expounds on the moral law. He adopts the method of focusing firstly on what each commandment forbids and then what virtues it prescribes. He does not focus on many lengthy exhortations to the unconverted although here and there he makes an appeal. For instance in the third commandment which is "*Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain*" he concludes the chapter with these words, "*Therefore, you who find yourself guilty ought to fear, and make haste to repent before judgment is executed upon you...*"⁴⁸ It seems that Brakel primarily aimed at using the law to teach believers not only what is sinful and displeasing to God but also to direct them how to live holy lives. While this is absolutely necessary, in light of the testimony of Scripture regarding the law being one of the means God uses to convict the ungodly of their sin and point them to Christ, Brakel might have made more in his exposition of the moral law in appealing to the unconverted to flee to Christ for refuge.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Brakel, Vol III: 137

⁴⁹ See Galatians 3:19-25 in which we read of one of the purposes of the law being to convict sinners of their sin and their need of the Saviour in Jesus Christ. Paul also mentions this use of the law in 1

Nevertheless this must not detract from the continued earnest appeals Brakel makes toward lost sinners. In his chapter immediately following his exposition of the moral law he focuses on the glorification of God. He points out that there are no virtues which are not comprehended in the perfect rule of life, the law of God. He then adds that while the most prominent aspects of each commandment were considered in the previous chapters, he would now deal with more explicit matters to stir up the soul to holiness.⁵⁰ He mentions that the ultimate goal in all we do is to glorify God. He goes on to write about mans failure to glorify God before considering the serious consequences of not doing so. At this point he addresses the reader directly once more, warning him of the terrible lot that will be his for failing to glorify God. He says, *“You envision glory and honour but God will cover you in shame...And when you arise at the resurrection, you ‘shall awake to everlasting shame and contempt’ (Daniel 12:2).”* He continues, *“Since you do not glorify God, he will give you over to the commission of all manner of sin – particularly the dishonouring of your own body by filthy lusts...God will glorify Himself in you by manifesting His righteousness and by punishing you in an extraordinary manner. What a dreadful condition it is to be the object of God’s wrath!”* He concludes his appeal to the soul who does not glorify God with these words, *“Hear this despisers of God, and tremble, for your judgments are approaching. Repent and flee from the wrath to come.”*⁵¹

Timothy 1:8-11 where he points out that the law is needed to reveal and expose sin within the unconverted.

⁵⁰ Brakel, III:243

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p.254

Love toward God

Brakel rightly begins these chapters by reminding his hearers that the content of the law is love – primarily love toward God and love toward ones neighbour. From chapter 57 to 61 he focuses on love toward God which is evident in love toward Jesus Christ, the fear of God, obedience toward God and hope in God. At various points he addresses the unconverted. He once more uses the technique of questioning his hearers in calling them to examine their faith. He asks whether his hearer has a love for God, whether he delights in God and enjoys Him. He continues by asking, *“Is there also found in you obedience, hatred toward sin, and love for the godly? Are you willing to sacrifice honor, possessions, life, soul and body for the Lord’s sake and do you yearn for felicity?”*⁵² He points out that you cannot love God if you love the world; you cannot serve God and mammon; you do not love God if you are still entirely permeated with self-love. His aim in this is to convince the self-deceived soul of his deluded state that he finds himself in. Having done this he then wants to highlight their miserable condition in order to lead them to repentance.⁵³ He mentions that being in such a condition in which there is a love for the world as opposed to God that they in reality hate and despise God. This makes them therefore an enemy of God. Since God hates workers of iniquity (Psalm 5:5) his wrath is upon them to destroy them. Brakel then rebukes such as are in this condition, *“You are a wretched man in yourself. You – who are so abominable – are hated by God, the Lord Jesus, the holy angels and the godly. You have nothing else to expect but the eternal wrath of God. Poor*

⁵² *Ibid*, p.269

⁵³ *Ibid*, p.270

*creature! Have you not lived long enough in such a way? Is it not now time to awake ere it is too late? Therefore, arise and flee the wrath to come.*⁵⁴

In his chapter on love toward the Lord Jesus, he points out that Jesus loves those who love Him. He quotes from Revelation 6:16-17 which speaks about the wrath of the Lamb. He then says, *“How wretched you then are who do not love Jesus, for Jesus does not love you and you are no partaker of his suffering and death. He hates you and is provoked to wrath against you. Therefore tremble!”*

Such an exhortation would be totally obnoxious to the modern day evangelical that holds to an Aminian view of the gospel which emphasizes Jesus love for every single person on earth. Yet, Brakel was merely echoing the words of Scripture which he quotes in this section from 1 Corinthians 16:22 *“If any man love not the Lord Jesus, let him be anathema.”* The strongest possible curse is pronounced by God upon the soul who does not love Christ. While the love and mercy of God in Christ needs to be proclaimed to sinners, Brakel would argue that it is equally important to warn those who refuse to repent of sin that God loathes and detests their ungodly life.

In his chapter on the fear of God he asks various questions, *“Do you fear God? Is your focus on your walk of life upon the Lord? Does reverence for his majesty arise within when you think about Him, speak of Him or make mention of His name? Do you reverently bow before Him...”* He goes on to say, *“Give*

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p.272

ear for a moment – you who neither fear the Lord, not give heed to Him but despise His name and His holy things.” He then writes of the serious consequences awaiting such who continue without the fear of the Lord; consequences which include finding neither rest nor safety from God; reaping the terror of the Lord; and being overcome with fear on every side after death. Then he ends with a touching appeal, *“Oh, that you would quietly reflect upon, and apply all this to yourself – and that you would believe it.”*⁵⁵

In his chapter on obedience toward God, he takes some time to reprimand the disobedient. His aim is that they might be converted for he says, *“I address the Word of God to you and declare to you your abominable condition, for it is a departing from God, a separating yourself from God and an ignoring of God. May it be the means to your conversion.”*⁵⁶ Brakel then makes his appeal based on the lowliness of man in relation to God. Here he writes, *“Shall he a creature, a worm of the dust, and one who is dependent in all things depart from God, the living God, the Fountain of Life, his Maker – that God who is majestic, all-glorious, and most worthy of obedience?”*⁵⁷ He points out that to depart from God is to be in the most abominable condition; it is to render any religious duties utterly in vain for God will not hear the prayers of the wicked (Proverbs 28:9); it is to have God depart from you and to face the vengeance of God.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 297

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 309

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 309

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 310-311

Brakel in still focusing on the theme of love toward God discusses the need for self-denial which is motivated from a love for the will of God. Here he rebukes the person who does not practice self-denial. He says, *“It is clear evidence that you are as yet unregenerate and cannot thus enter heaven. You are not a partaker of Christ and His merits. You are a worldly minded person and your portion is only in this world. You will experience nothing but sorrow as you either seek, find or miss the things of this world, and after this life there will be eternal destruction.”*⁵⁹

It is clear from these chapters connected to the theme of a love for God, that Brakel himself had a great love and fear of God. Absolute love and obedience was a necessity in ones walk with God. Anything less than this was sin and needed to be repented of. Of great concern to Brakel was the sinful plight of those self-deceived or living in open rebellion toward God. His great concern for them is brought out again and again as he calls the unconverted to examine themselves in the light of the truth of God’s Word and His judgment upon sin.

Love for ones neighbour

Having focused on various virtues with regards to a love toward God, Brakel then considers love toward ones neighbour. He defines this love as being a frame of heart of God’s children, wrought by God, in which their heart is

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 409

engaged with desires to have harmonious fellowship with their neighbour, and to seek their welfare as well as their own.⁶⁰

He addresses those who say they have no desire to love others and who are not affected by the needs of others. He tells them plainly that they are not born of God and that they are not Christians. He addresses those who falsely argue that they are Christians because they have been baptized and attend the Lord's Supper. He says, "*You are lying and you are deceiving yourself, for if you were a Christian you would love those whom Christ loves and those who love Christ.*"⁶¹ Brakel's direct approach to addressing sin and self-deception might be considered by some to be insensitive but Brakel is merely obeying the instruction given in Ephesians 4:15 to speak the truth in love. Love for ones neighbour necessitates telling others the truth even if it may hurt in order to deliver them from the greater evil that sin would do to them.

Brakel then considers a number of virtues which are associated with the command to love ones neighbour, virtues such as humility, meekness, peaceableness, compassion and prudence. With regards to meekness he writes of God's inevitable judgement on those without meekness. He likens such to those who were around in the days of the flood when the earth was filled with violence. He likens them Cain and Lamech whose wrath toward the fellow man was great. He rebukes them with these words, "*As insignificant as it may seem to you that you are without meekness; as heroic as you consider*

⁶⁰ Brakel, IV: 53

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p. 60

*yourself in your wrath and in avenging yourself, so abominable you are in the eyes of God, and so dreadful will your end be if you do not repent.*⁶²

With regards the virtue of a peaceable disposition, Brakel addresses the unpeaceful as those without grace and who bear the image of the devil.⁶³ He quotes Proverbs 6:16,19 where it is mentioned that of the seven things that are an abomination to God, a false witness who speaks lies and one who sows discord among his brethren are mentioned. He says, *“Since discord, dissension, and quarrelling are evidences of an evil and murderous heart which is filled with anger, envy, vengefulness; since such will not inherit the kingdom of heaven, but rather will have their portion in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, you cannot expect anything else. You who live in discord with men, be afraid of yourself and the wrath of God. God also lives in discord with you and He will prevail over you.”*⁶⁴

Brakel then in addressing his hearers with regards to their love for God and their love for their neighbours does not fail to examine, question and exhort those who are deceived and lost to repent of their sin that they might be saved.

The resurrection from the dead and eternal glory

The doctrine of the last things lends fertile ground to Brakel to again address the unconverted. Regarding the resurrection of the dead, Brakel makes use of

⁶² *Ibid*, p. 87

⁶³ *Ibid*, p. 96-97

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 97

the five senses in rebuking the ungodly. He writes, *“Those eyes which you now misuse so greatly to stir up filthy lust, whereby you now display the wrath, pride and vanity of the heart, will behold with terror the Lord Jesus, the righteous judge and see light no more. Those ears, which are now ready to receive all vanities, curiosities, immoral language, foolishness and backbiting, will hear with terror the sentence of the Judge, ‘Depart from Me, ye cursed,’ and to all eternity your ears will be filled with the howling of those who are damned together with you...That mouth and tongue which you now misuse to curse, lie, backbite, say vain things, indulge, carouse, drink and fornicate, will then howl and scream, and in grief you will chew in that tongue...You who now despise the smell of the poor will be no more than a filthy stench. Those hands which now handle cards and dice, and which you now misuse in unrighteousness...will then wring in pain. Yes, all the members which you are now using as weapons of unrighteousness to serve the world and sin will eternally be in the flames.”*⁶⁵ He then appeals, *“May the terror of the Lord persuade you to believe.”* What Brakel is doing is to inform his hearers that the very body which they are using in this life to indulge in the pleasures of sin will turn out to be an instrument of pain and torture after the resurrection. He is as he said, trying to persuade the unconverted to tremble at the thought and repent of their sins.

While Brakel more freely reminded the unconverted of the terror of the Lord regarding the resurrection he also sought to persuade them to take hold of glory. In his chapter concerning eternal glory he exhorts the unconverted to

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p. 336

strive for faith in Christ in order that they might become a partaker in salvation and be delivered from eternal perdition. He says, *“It is presently offered to you, and therefore, take hold of it before it is too late.”*⁶⁶

From the preceding study on Brakel’s use of various doctrines in seeking to awake sinners to their need of salvation and calling them to repentance, we detect a constant yearning and concern in Brakel for the conversion of the lost. In a letter to a godly merchant, he makes the following appeal to some lost soul, *“What now, there is yet hope for you, that is, if you but desire to be saved in the way which I shall propose to you. There is no counsel for those who are insensitive to their wretched condition, who will not hear of either hell or heaven, and have neither desire nor fear. But poor man, awake! For you are at the very edge of hell – and behold you are falling into it. Awake, awake, before it is too late! If not, then with horror we must see you sink away into eternal damnation.”*⁶⁷

One can almost detect in Brakel the same heart that Christ demonstrated for rebellious sinners when he was on earth when he wept over Jerusalem and longed for its conversion.⁶⁸ This is the heart that every preacher of the gospel is meant to have, a heart that beats and throbs to see sinners delivered from their sin and eternal judgment and translated into the kingdom of God. Such a heart will not fail to preach Christ and call sinners to repentance from all of Scripture even as Brakel did. Whether Brakel was preaching on the covenant

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p. 367

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p. 602-604

⁶⁸ In Luke 19:41-44 we read of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem at the knowledge of its impending destruction because of their rejection of Him as the Messiah.

of grace, regeneration, faith, justification, adoption, spiritual peace and joy; whether he preached on love toward God expressed in a fear of God and obedience to the moral law or love toward ones neighbour expressed in humility, meekness and a peaceable disposition; or whether he was preaching on the resurrection from the dead or eternal glory, Brakel seldom failed to address the unconverted. And when he did, he did so in an effort to awaken them from the desperate state they were in by reminding them of the terror of God's wrath as well as the blessedness of the gospel. Time and again he would call them to examine their hearts, repent of sin and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation. What would God do within His church if modern preachers had such concern for sinners in their own ministry today?

IV. Conclusion

There is a vital need for a fresh working of the Holy Spirit through the preaching of God's Word in the church today. William Cooper speaking of the church in America today wrote, *"For a great while, it has been a dead and barren time without fruit in all the churches of the reformation. The showers of blessing have been restrained. The influence of the Spirit stopped. The gospel has not had any famous success. Conversions have been rare and dubious. Few sons and daughters have been born to God."*⁶⁹

His concern can be echoed in many evangelical churches in the Western World. What is needed again today are the voices of many more John the

⁶⁹ Parrish, A & Sproul, R.C.,2000:43

Baptist type of preachers who prepare the hearts for Christ to save by preaching a message of repentance. Indeed the question must be asked as to whether the doctrine of repentance has been all but forgotten in many of our churches. Has the gospel been reduced to a simply message of deciding for Christ where no repentance is called for and where the doctrine of hell and eternal judgment is made little of?

Brakel serves to awaken us to the need to take seriously the call to preach repentance earnestly. John the Baptist did. The apostles did.⁷⁰ Brakel followed in these prophetic and apostolic footsteps in his ministry preaching repentance from all parts of Scripture. What is undoubtedly needed today is the authoritative, Spirit anointed preaching of the Word in which believers are exhorted to live holy lives and the self-deceived and unconverted are called to repent of their sin and flee the wrath of God. Far too little preaching is heard where sin is denounced and the sinner shaken with strong rebukes and warnings from the pulpit.

Far too many hearers in churches are entertained and made to feel happy when they are living in a state of unbelief and self-deception in which they assume they are right with God and going to heaven, when in reality the flames of hell are licking at their feet. It is hoped that from this essay, the reader will be made aware of the necessity for repentance and faith in Christ to be preached from all of Scripture. Such preaching is needed today;

⁷⁰ In the gospels we read that John the Baptist came preaching “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 3:2). He also called sinners to bear fruit in keeping with repentance. (Matt 3:8). The apostles like Peter preached repentance on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:38). They continued to do this in their preaching (Acts 3:19; 17:30)

preaching where the gospel is not watered down but burns with a heavenly flame of conviction; preaching that warns sinners to flee from sin and the terrible wrath of God that is coming upon the unrepentant. May God be pleased to raise up more preachers in the mould of Brakel who will not be afraid to rebuke and exhort sinners to flee to Christ for salvation from sin and wrath. And may God be pleased to bless such preaching to the awakening of His church and the salvation of His elect.

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