

“Satisfied with the Lord’s All-Sufficiency”

Paul M. Smalley

CH 856 The Theology of Wilhelmus à Brakel

Professor Bartel Elshout

Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

Grand Rapids, Michigan

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I. Introduction

The subject of this paper is the theology of Wilhelmus à Brakel, a Reformed Dutch pastor and theologian who lived in the 17th and start of the 18th centuries. The thesis of this paper is: *Joy in God is central and pervasive to true religion in the theology of Wilhelmus à Brakel.* Hence comes the paper's title, "Satisfied with the Lord's All-Sufficiency," a phrase taken from Brakel's own pen (3.370).¹ This paper does not try to establish that joy is the center of Brakel's theology, but that it is central. Joy stands among his core concerns and permeates his theology.

The matter of this study is *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, the English translation of Brakel's magnum opus, "*Redelijke Godsdienst.*" The phrase, taken from the Dutch translation of Romans 12:1, literally means, "Reasonable Religion" (1.3). This work consists of over 2,400 pages organized in 103 chapters, plus an exposition of redemptive history. It contains only one chapter on spiritual joy, which might suggest that joy held but a small place in Brakel's teaching. But consider the following table of how often various terms for joy appear in Brakel's text.² Note that these terms for joy appear throughout all four volumes. Note too that such words are used over 2,400 times by Brakel—almost as many references to joy as there are pages.

Term	Volume 1	Volume 2	Volume 3	Volume 4	All Volumes
Joy	89	265	95	117	566
Joyful	19	60	40	23	142
Rejoice	105	152	100	85	442
Sweet	49	70	77	86	282
Delight	152	202	260	142	756
Felicity	76	68	38	46	228
All Terms	490	817	610	499	2,416

¹ Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, trans. Bartel Elshout (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1992-1994). The notation 3.370 refers to volume 3, page 370.

² These statistics are based on computer searches of digital files of Brakel's text. The count includes tables of contents and headings, but excludes introductory matter not written by Brakel, and indices. I am indebted to Bartel Elshout for providing the digital files necessary for such searches.

As we will see, Brakel used the language of joy in the context of knowing, worshiping, and serving the all-sufficient God. Brakel loved to write of the “all-sufficient” God or Divine “all-sufficiency”—the expressions appear 60 times from his pen. Who was this man who drenched his theological reflections with doxological joy? We next consider Brakel and his background.

Wilhelmus à Brakel and the Dutch Second Reformation

Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635-1711) was the son of a godly minister and praying mother who lived in the area of Leeuwarden, the Netherlands. Converted at a very young age, Wilhelmus studied at the academy of Franeker and was admitted into pastoral ministry in the national Reformed Church of the Netherlands. While awaiting a call from a congregation he studied under Gisbertus Voetius and Andreas Essenius. Brakel then proceeded to serve various churches for the next forty-nine years. His courageous stand against government interference in church matters propelled him into national fame. He also opposed a zealous religious sect known as the Labadists. But Brakel's greatest work consisted in his participation in a movement known as the *Nadere Reformatie*, or Dutch Second Reformation. This movement began with Willem Teelinck (1579-1629) and concluded with Theodore Vander Groe (1705-1784). Similar to English Puritanism but with a distinct focus on the Netherlands, the Second Reformation aimed to apply Reformation doctrine to the heart and life.

Brakel's greatest contribution to this cause came in the 1700 publication of his masterpiece, *Redelijke Godsdienst*. The first edition sold out in a year. There were more than twenty Dutch editions in a hundred years. It was translated into German, and finally, almost

three centuries later, into English.³ *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, in the words of its translator, "is experiential systematic theology," a doctrinal handbook for the church full of "warmth and spiritual vibrancy."⁴ As we observed by word counts, the book throbs with joy. Another prominent feature is its saturation in Scripture. Brakel filled his pages with Bible.

Brakel's delightful approach to doctrine finds its fountain in the Scriptures (consider the Psalms or Paul's exclamations of praise as in Eph. 1:3-14). The stream of Scripture-soaked joy flows through Christian history especially by way of Augustine, the medieval mystics,⁵ and the Reformed tradition.⁶ The English Puritan William Perkins (1558-1602), who profoundly influenced the Dutch Reformed, wrote, "Theologie is the science of living blessedly for ever."⁷

Nevertheless Brakel mixed this ingredient of joy into his writings in unusual quantity. For Brakel, joy in Christ was the promise of the gospel.

The Good News of Great Joy

What did Wilhelmus à Brakel mean by the word "joy"? He wrote, "Joy is the pleasure, delight, and rejoicing of the heart. It is the expression of a spirit set at liberty (or enlarged), generated by a present blessing or due to the anticipation of a future blessing" (2.455). He then defined the nature of "spiritual joy," writing,

³ W. Fieret, "Wilhelmus à Brakel," in Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 1.xxxi-lxxxi. Bartel Elshout, *The Pastoral and Practical Theology of Wilhelmus à Brakel* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1997), 3-19.

⁴ Elshout, 20.

⁵ Bernard of Clairvaux included some 6,000 Scripture citations in his 86 sermons on the Song of Solomon. The Bible is quoted or paraphrased about a thousand times in Thomas a Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*. 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), 31, 75.

⁶ Consider the openings of the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) and the Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647).

⁷ William Perkins, *A Golden Chaine* (Cambridge: John Legat, 1600), 1. "J. van der Haar records 185 seventeenth-century printings in Dutch of Perkins's individual or collected works, twice as many as any other Puritan... He and Ames, his most influential student on the continent, influenced Gisbertus Voetius (1589-1676) and numerous Dutch *Nadere Reformatie* (Further Reformation) theologians." Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson, *Meet the Puritans* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), 475.

This spiritual joy consists in a delightful motion of the soul, generated by the Holy Spirit in the heart of believers, whereby He convinces them of the felicity of their state, causes them to enjoy the benefits of the covenant of grace, and assures them of their future felicity. (2.456)

His definition describes spiritual joy as a theological, covenantal, supernatural, and emotional experience. It is "a delightful motion of the soul." It is a mystical experience where the Spirit of God meets the spirit of men in Christ.

Brakel considered joy to be both pervasive and central to the gospel of Christ. One may see it from this single, extended summary of the gospel provided by Brakel. The language of joy has been highlighted by placing it in italics, which are not original in Brakel's writing.

All felicity, full satisfaction, and enduring joy of man consists in having communion with God—such was Adam's life prior to the fall. After the fall, man's understanding has been darkened; he has become a stranger to the life of God, is deprived of the glory of God, and thus travels upon the broad way to destruction.

In His goodness God has revealed a way by which a condemnable sinner can be reconciled with, and *enjoy God, this being his felicity, satisfaction, and joy*. In this life, this is but in principle, but after death and the general resurrection of the dead, this will be *enjoyed in perfection* in the third heaven—in the paradise of God.

The Lord Jesus Christ is this way, being the one, eternal, living, and only wise God and the eternal Son of the eternal Father. He has assumed our own human nature out of the holy Virgin Mary and has united it to Himself in singleness of person. He is thus true and eternal God, and a perfectly holy man. He was ordained by the Father in the eternal Counsel of Peace—or in the eternal covenant of redemption—to be Surety and Savior. In having given Himself to that end, He as Surety has removed all the sins of all the elect and taken them upon Himself. By His suffering and death He satisfied the justice of God, thereby reconciling the elect with God. Furthermore, by His obedience in fulfilling the law, He has merited a perfect righteousness for them. He is "the way, the truth, and the life," and no man comes unto the Father, but by Him (John 14:6). Salvation is in none other, and He can save to the uttermost all those who come to God by Him.

God causes this Savior and Surety, being the only way unto salvation, to be proclaimed in various places in the world by means of the gospel, that is, good news. He makes it known to men and calls them; He urges everyone to desire this salvation—and for the obtaining of it, to receive this Savior as their Surety, and surrender to Him in order to be led by Him unto salvation. Is not a person wicked who insists on remaining in his

wretched condition; who despises the salvation, *eternal bliss, and joy in the perfect enjoyment of communion with God*; who despises God, rejects the Surety, disdainfully rejects all friendly invitations, and thus goes lost forever—is he not frightfully wicked? On the contrary, *is not he blessed* who is acquainted with the necessity of, the full salvation in, and the friendly invitation to come to this Surety, Jesus Christ? *Is not he blessed who delights in this salvation, desires this way, and becomes a partaker of it in this way?*” (2.601-602).

We observe that man's joy in God is the goal of creation and redemption. Joy in God is the offer of the gospel, which the unrepentant despise. The joy of the Lord is a mark of a true believer. At the heart of Christianity is the enjoyment of God. Therefore we begin our detailed examination of Brakel's theology of joy with the doctrine of God.

II. God: The Fullness of Joy

Brakel followed the Biblical doctrines of the Belgic (Dutch) Confession. Its first article reads, “We all believe in our hearts and confess with our mouths that there is a single and simple spiritual being, whom we call God—eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, unchangeable, infinite, almighty; completely wise, just, and good, and the overflowing source of all good.”⁸

The last phrase, “the overflowing source of all good,” especially pertains to our subject.

The first attribute of God which Brakel set forth was, “The Perfection of God,” writing,

He has no need of anything. No one can add to or subtract anything from His being, neither can anyone increase or decrease His felicity. His perfection consists in His self-sufficiency, His self-existence, and that He is the beginning—the first (Rev. 1:8). His all-sufficiency is within and for Himself, the אֱלֹהֵי שְׁדַי (*El Shaddai*), *the All-sufficient One* (Gen. 17:1). “Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though He needed any thing” (Acts 17:25). (1.90)⁹

⁸ <http://www.puritanseminary.org/media/BelgicConfession.pdf>, accessed 5-24-2010.

⁹ Compare the teaching of William Ames (1576-1633), “10. The sufficiency of God is his quality of being sufficient in himself for himself and for us. Therefore he is called all-sufficient, Gen. 17:1... 38. Therefore our faith, seeking eternal life, rests in God alone because God is the fountain of all life, John 5:26... 43. God is infinite... 45. Hence

It was common for Reformed theologians to connect God's happiness to his all-sufficiency.¹⁰ Wolfgang Musculus (1497-1563) wrote,

First we call Sufficiency, that which excludes all lack, which is so furnished with all abundance of all things necessary, that nothing more can be desired. This the Philosopher terms Sufficiency in itself, and attributes thereunto happiness, and the most high and perfect goodness. But this doth belong to the nature of God only.¹¹

In this connection the Reformed followed Augustine regarding the Divine blessedness, and Boethius' definition of blessedness as "a state perfected by the union of all good things."¹²

Augustine wrote of God, "Luxury would fain be called plenty and abundance but Thou art the fulness and unfailing plenteousness of unfading joys."¹³ The medieval mystics also stood in this

Augustinian tradition of delighting in God. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) wrote, "The cause of loving God is God himself... No one can be more justly loved, or with greater benefit." He also wrote, "No one, for example, pays a hungry man to eat, or a thirsty man to drink... How much more does the soul that loves God ask for no reward but God?"¹⁴

Willem Teelinck (1579-1629), the first link in the golden chain of the Dutch Second Reformation, also reveled in God as the Best and Infinite One beyond comprehension. Arie de Reuver wrote about Teelinck's joy in God,

He calls him a "Spring," a "Fountain," a "Full Ocean" and also a "Sun." He therefore seeks God with a burning desire, "more intense that whatever can be thought of in this world." He esteems but one friendly glance from his face more than all the 'pleasures'

faith does not look just for a certain measure of blessedness to be communicated by God, but an immeasurable glory." William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, ed. John D. Eusden (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1968), 84-86 [I.iv].

¹⁰ Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics, Volume Three: The Divine Essence and Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 379-384. Henceforth cited as *PRRD*.

¹¹ *Loci communes*, xlili, cited by Muller, *PRRD, Volume 3*, 369. On Musculus, cf. Craig S. Farmer's short biographical sketch in Richard A. Muller and John L. Thompson, eds., *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 216-218.

¹² *De consolation philosophiae*, quoted by Muller, *PRRD, Volume 3*, 372.

¹³ *Confessions*, 2.6/13, in *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. J. G. Pilkington (New York: Liveright, 1943), 36.

¹⁴ *De Diligendo Deo*, I.1; VI.17; in *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, trans. G. R. Evans (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 174, 187-88.

of the world, even if these were to last ten thousand years... joy in the Lord should surpass all earthly joy. He should always be “the holy Fountain of everything that we desire,” above health, peace and life itself. All these gifts are derived from God, but they are not God himself. They are “only little droplets in the whole ocean” and “rays of that marvelous Light.”¹⁵

Thus Brakel stood in a long line of Christian writers when he held that God is the sum of all goodness in infinite degree. Sometimes his theology virtually sings in adoration, as here:

God is most adorable in Himself, and all that is adorable is to be found in God. To adore that which is beautiful, delightful, glorious, and lovely, is not a heavy task. It is naturally attractive to the heart. All this is true concerning God in an infinite manner, and he who beholds God cannot but love. Words are too insignificant, passions too feeble, and everything falls short in showing forth the beauty of the Lord. (3.273)

Brakel, confessing the perfection of God, taught that God's all-sufficiency is his sufficiency for our joy. He wrote at the close of his discussion of Divine perfection,

Such is our God, who not only is all-sufficient in Himself but who with His all-sufficiency can fill and saturate the soul to such an overflowing measure that it has need of nothing else but to have God as its portion. The soul so favored is filled with such light, love, and happiness, that it desires nothing but this. “Whom have I in heaven but Thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside Thee” (Psa. 73:25). (1.91)

Brakel said in another place,

As He is all-sufficient in Himself, He is also שׁדַּי (*shaddai*), that is, all-sufficient for each and every partaker of the covenant, to fill them to overflowing with so much light, love, peace, joy, and felicity, that they do not and cannot desire anything but God alone. Yes, they experience that they can only perceive a small drop of that all-sufficiency. (1.432)

Brakel says, “God Himself is their portion and complete joy” (2.59). “All salvation, comfort, delight, holiness, and felicity for the soul is to be found in having fellowship with God... Such fellowship with God is heaven itself” (2.596-97). The Great Commandment sums up all other commands because, “Love in essence has no other object than that which is most

¹⁵ de Reuver, 126-27.

eminent, most cherishable, most satisfying, and unchangeable—which is God Himself” (3.263).

The Spirit gives us an “insatiable desire to continually enjoy communion with God” (1.188).

God's all-sufficiency is not the only divine quality which rejoices his creatures, for in his simplicity everything about God is all-sufficient. Brakel called believers to delight in his righteousness, be fully satisfied with his goodness, be ignited by his love, fall in love with his holiness, rejoice in his sovereignty, rest quietly satisfied in his wisdom, and put joyful hope in his faithfulness (1.134-136). The deep mystery of the Trinity is “the fountain of all comfort,” and the source of “much light, comfort, joy, and holiness” (1.191; cf. 2.628). Agreeing with and doing God's will is the desire and delight of his servants (1.4). Seeing the glory of the Creator in his creation should fill us with “wonder, delight, and joy” (1.283). His providences reveal him to our “astonishment and joy” (1.350). It is our joy that he is Lord (1.208). Even his incomprehensibility makes his people “sink away in sweet amazement... and rejoice that God's glory so far exceeds his comprehension” (1.250).

The essence of heaven is “to be satisfied with the Lord's all-sufficiency, to be irradiated by the light of His countenance” (3.370). Brakel often used the expression of being “irradiated” by God's light, like being bathed in the warm light of the sun.¹⁶ Being irradiated by God leads to being “ignited” by God.¹⁷ Brakel wrote, “This light has an inherent warmth and ignites the soul in love” (4.145, cf. 259). The God who burns with infinite, joyful light ignites men to burn with him. To see this better, we turn to the second locus of theology, Brakel's doctrine of Man.

¹⁶ 1.134, 263; 2.443, 444, 597, 602, 650; 3.101, 257, 258, 266, 370; 4.25. “The Dutch word, translated as irradiated, alludes to the shining of the sun. It is the idea of the soul being bathed in the light of God's countenance—being enveloped by the rays of the Sun of Righteousness.” Personal email correspondence from Bartel Elshout (6-4-10).

¹⁷ 1.134, 250, 450, 655; 2.125, 276, 421, 430, 432, 444, 676; 3.246, 283.

III. Man: The Seeker of Joy

Brakel's doctrine of man followed his covenant theology. He began with man as originally created and put under the covenant of works. Then he considered man as fallen under the curse, having broken that covenant.

Created Man: Designed for Joy

It might surprise critics of the Reformed doctrine of predestination that Brakel insisted, "God created all men in Adam for the enjoyment of felicity" (1.329). "Man was created to rejoice; to be joyful is his life and health... all that man does, he does to be happy" (2.455). The Creator embedded the pursuit of happiness into man's nature. "Our nature is naturally inclined toward joy, and every person desires joy" (2.464; cf. 3.329).

Man was not created to find joy in himself. Brakel related this to his concept of sufficiency. Brakel wrote, "Since man is not all-sufficient within himself, he must seek all his delight and joy elsewhere, that is, outside of himself" (2.455). "Man is not naturally self-sufficient; he is but a vessel into which something can be inserted. And, in order to be filled, he has desires which—as hands—reach out for that which he deems to be fulfilling to him" (3.381, cf. 449). To desire happiness is so essential to humanity that "to eradicate all desires... would be to dehumanize man" (3.403).

God designed man to find happiness only in God, "man's felicity consisting in the enjoyment of God Himself—an enjoyment not to be found in anything outside of Him" (1.360).

Brakel loved to cite the statements of Psalm 73:23-26, 28, quoting selections from this Scripture in no less than thirty-three places in his book.¹⁸ It is written in that Scripture,

Nevertheless I am continually with thee: thou hast holden me by my right hand. Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever... But it is good for me to draw near to God: I have put my trust in the Lord GOD, that I may declare all thy works.

Brakel believed that the image of God consisted in the holy capacity to delight in God.

Brakel could even say that when the Holy Spirit “imprinted the image of God” upon the redeemed, this image includes “their insatiable desire to continually enjoy communion with God” (1.188). This was the case when God first created man in his image. Brakel wrote,

The essential form, the true essence of the image of God, consists in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, they being the qualities that regulate the faculties of the soul: intellect, will, and affections.

(1) The intellect was pure and transparent, immediately beholding God...

(2) Additionally, the will was holy and righteous, being satisfied and delighted with God. It was joyful and fervent in love, having no desires outside of God. It readily, joyfully, and perfectly performed the will of God...

(3) The affections were fully regulated, never preceding the exercise of the intellect and the will, but being an orderly consequence thereof. All desires were Godward, in order to continually enjoy Him, and toward the performance of His will. (1.324)

When God made the covenant of works, “Adam had the promise of eternal felicity” annexed to the commandment (1.360; cf. 2.612). This promise of joy was implicit in the law (cf. Mat. 19:16-17; Lev. 18:5; Rom. 7:10) and explicit in the “sacrament, that is, a sign and seal” of the tree of life (1.360-362). The requirement of obedience did not tarnish the joy of Paradise.

Obedience to God is of the essence of human joy in God. Brakel wrote,

¹⁸ 1.91, 133, 134, 249, 263, 353, 432, 437, 454, 512, 646; 2.237, 251, 326, 328, 329, 431, 432, 440, 443, 625; 3.102, 387, 550, 555; 4.21, 145, 146, 181, 357, 365, 480, 485. It appears that Brakel never cited verse 27.

Every man is obligated toward obedience by virtue of the nature of God and of his own position relative to Him... human nature mandates it, and it constitutes the well-being and felicity of man... The nature of obedience consists in subjection to God. Man, by his very nature, has been placed in subjection to God. Adam acknowledged this subjection with delight and joyfully subjected himself to the Lord. (3.303-304)

When the Lord God revealed the covenant of works to Adam, "he could not but delight in, desire, and embrace [the promises] with all his heart." Similarly he rejoiced in the condition of obedience, "for this was not only the way leading to felicity, but was his present felicity itself" (1.364). Tragically, Adam did not persevere in the way of felicity.

Fallen Man: Excluded from Joy

As a result of Adam's disobedience to the covenant of works, all mankind fell from joy into "misery" (1.377, 417). Brakel warned his readers,

Go to Paradise and behold how ingeniously and gloriously you were created in Adam, enjoying sweet communion with God and your very own nature. Behold how willfully you have fallen away from God and have joined ranks with the devil. Having thus sinned, you have forfeited the glory of God. (1.418; cf. 2.601)

The God who once was our delight is now our angry Judge. His glory is now our terror (1.420-421). The perfections of God which once satisfied man will overwhelm the soul with dread (1.423). "And now, oh miserable one, what will you do?" (1.424).

Man remains by nature a seeker of joy. But, Brakel explained, his quest for joy has turned from the Creator to his creatures. "Natural man is empty and desires to be filled. He does not know God as the all-sufficient One and he has no desire after God. His passions therefore focus on the creature and he says to whoever appears to be capable of entertaining him, 'be thou my satisfaction'" (3.401; cf. 2.456, 580; 3.358, 381).

Man's love for Divine glory has also turned inward, perverting his natural self-love into self-deification. Brakel wrote,

God has created self-love in man... After the fall, however, love has become entirely distorted, as it causes man to be opposed to God, to make himself as God, and all to end in man. This principle governs fallen man in his operations, and he wants everyone to function toward him in harmony with this principle. (3.399)

Fallen man's quest for joy is doomed to failure, for the creation cannot be enjoyed apart from the favor of its sovereign Creator. Brakel warned, "While you remain the object of His wrath, all His creatures will be opposed to you, and every one as it were waits for permission to destroy you... Nothing will give you peace as long as your Maker is displeased with you" (1.278).

The final end of this perverted pursuit of joy apart from God is Hell. Brakel described Hell in terms of man's need for the Divine all-sufficiency.

If this does not move you, proceed to observe the dreadful pit of damnation, and listen to the gnashing of teeth, the weeping, the frightful shriek, "Woe, woe, woe," the terror, and the violent raging of the conscience of the damned in the eternal fire. Consider that to all eternity they will never enjoy one beam of light, nor one quiet moment, but will eternally be overcome with inexpressible despair knowing they will never be delivered as well as be subject to an inexpressible perception of the wrath of God.

In all quietness you ought to meditate upon the state of damnation. First of all, what will it be to have a soul and body which cannot find fulfillment within itself and thus cannot be satisfied unless this fulfillment comes from elsewhere, which, however, will be lacking to all eternity. There will not be the least refreshment, neither will there be food, drink, light, sleep, nor companionship by which one could find some delight in conversation. On the contrary, there will be an infinite separation from God, angels, the godly, joy, and glory. At the present time one may be able to forget his unhappiness and sorrow by a variety of means and thus feel no sorrow concerning that of which he is deprived. Then, however, it will be unbearable when these various means are removed. What dreadful despair will this yield for the unfulfilled and sorrowing soul! (1.422)

From this dread subject we now turn to Brakel's good news of joy in Jesus Christ.

IV. Christ: The Mediator of Joy

In Brakel's arrangement of his theology, he included under the doctrine of God the doctrines of the Divine decrees, predestination, and the covenant of redemption. However Brakel grouped the topic of the covenant of grace with his Christology, so we consider the covenant here.

Eternal Covenant: The Plan of Joy

One reason not to make joy the organizing principle of Brakel's theology is that Brakel himself identified another organizing principle for his work. After teaching on the covenant of grace (ch. 16), he subsumed all the rest of his theology under "particular aspects of the covenant" (1.465). He repeated this covenantal framework again (2.3), confirming that it provides the structure of his theology. He was a covenant theologian, and so joy in God is covenantal joy.

In opening the covenant Brakel returned to the all-sufficiency of God.

The one party and covenant initiator is the Lord God who in this covenant must be viewed as the all-sufficient One. God is all-sufficient in Himself, and does not need the worship of man's hands... As He is all-sufficient in Himself, He is also *שׁדַּי* (*shaddai*), that is, all-sufficient for each and every partaker of the covenant, to fill them to overflowing with so much light, love, peace, joy, and felicity, that they do not and cannot desire anything but God alone. Yes, they experience that they can only perceive a small drop of that all-sufficiency... In this covenant God is also revealed to us as an omnipotent God, who not only is desirous to communicate His all-sufficiency and goodness, but is also able to do so. (1.431-33)

God is not only sufficient to keep his covenant, but he is also sufficient as the great promise of the covenant. The essence of the covenant of grace is that God gives himself to his fallen creatures to enjoy. Here again Brakel's theology sings. He said,

First, God offers Himself to be the God of a poor, contrite sinner. "I will establish My covenant ... to be a God unto thee" (Gen. 17:7); "But this shall be the covenant ... I will be their God, and they shall be My people" (Jer. 31:33).

This is the sum and substance of all true felicity. No one knows what this is, however, except those who enjoy it. This felicity does not consist in receiving a benefit from God, but in having God Himself as one's portion. "The portion of Jacob is not like them: for He is the former of all things" (Jer. 10:16). This was the joy of the church. "The Lord is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in Him" (Lam. 3:24). Herein Asaph found rest and encouraged himself in all tribulations. "Whom have I in heaven but Thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside Thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever" (Psa. 73:25-26).

Who can give expression to the magnitude of this felicity? It consists in being overshadowed with God's gracious presence; to be surrounded with His supporting and preserving omnipotence; to rest in His unfailing faithfulness; to rejoice in God's eternal fullness, majesty, and glory: to be enlightened by His light, goodness, and love; to be satisfied with His all-sufficiency; to lose oneself in His infinity and incomprehensibility; to bow before Him with delight and love; to be subject to Him; and to worship Him. This felicity consists in rendering Him honor and glory with heart, tongue, and deeds—being conscious of His perfections and because He is so worthy of this. It consists in fearing Him, in serving Him, and a complete and full acquiescence in His will because He is God. This felicity is such that I can neither comprehend it, nor can you define it. Rather, we must lose ourselves in its infinity, exclaiming, "Hallelujah!", "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord" (Psa. 33:12)! (1.436-37)

The "origin and basis" of the covenant of grace is the covenant of redemption between God the Father and God the Son (1.262). The Father eternally ordained that his Son become the Surety of the elect among fallen mankind (1:251ff). The work of the Surety was to satisfy God's justice as the representative of his people. This covenant made both God and Christ "fully and mutually satisfied" (1.261). Christ undertook this awesome task with joy (1.258, 261), the joy of doing his Father's will (Psa. 40:6-8), and the joy of his future glory (Heb. 12:2). The Father had promised to anoint him with "the oil of gladness" above all others (Psa. 45:7). The Father arranged the marriage of his Son to the elect with approval and delight (2.88). In their love for each other and mankind, the covenant of redemption reveals "the eternal, mutual delight of the Father and the Son to save you" (1.263). Therefore the covenant of redemption is "the foundation for all sure comfort, joy, holy amazement, and the magnification of God"

(1.261). The covenant of redemption arranged for the Surety to accomplish “everything which was needful to bring them to felicity” (2.582). The elect can rejoice in it as they experience the Holy Spirit working in them.

They will be enabled to exclaim feelingly, joyously, and lovingly, “For of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things; to whom be glory for ever. Amen” (Rom. 11:36)... Oh, how blessed is he who is incorporated in this covenant and, being enveloped and irradiated by this eternal love, is stirred up to love in return, exclaiming, “We love Him, because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19). (1.262-63)

Though the covenant of grace expresses the inner joy of the Trinity, Brakel carefully guarded against any notion of our salvation increasing God's joy. He must remain all-sufficient in himself. The covenant aims at God's glorification in our satisfaction. So Brakel wrote,

The purpose of this covenant must be carefully noted... This is not to His benefit, for it neither increases his felicity nor renders Him more perfect and glorious. Rather, the purpose as far as He is concerned is the revelation of His grace, goodness, wisdom, righteousness, and power; and concerning man, His purpose is to bring him, motivated by love, to felicity. (1.443)

Outside the covenant of grace “there is nothing but misery” for fallen man (1.449).

Inside the covenant God himself becomes the joy of man. Brakel wrote, “God Himself is the supreme good and the complete felicity of man. In the covenant, God promises Himself to believers and God is thus the object of hope” (3.319). Therefore Brakel exhorts, “You who are truly partakers of this covenant... rejoice and delight yourself... even though you do not enjoy as much of this as you desire. One day you shall enjoy all this in full measure” (1.450). Inherent in the covenant is turning from this world to take “God alone” as “your desire, resting place, joy, delight.... The world is therefore from now on, of no significance” (2.598). At the same time, the covenant itself, not our feelings or experiences, is our stability (2.596). For the covenant stands upon the immutability of God and the finished work of Christ.

Incarnate Surety: The Embodiment of Joy

Brakel loved the word “Surety,” using it over five hundred times through all four volumes. For him it encapsulated his covenant theology of Man as God’s debtor under the covenant of works, and Christ as Man’s legal representative paying the debt for him (1.256, 465ff). Without the mediation of Jesus Christ, there could be no enjoyment of God by sinners.¹⁹ Those who desire God are “yearning, desiring, praying, and crying out” for Jesus the Surety (1.619; cf. 3.283, 288). When someone asks how he can rejoice when he has sinned so much, Brakel responded, “The cause and foundation for your joy must not be found within yourself and your virtuousness, but outside of yourself and in Christ” (2.465). After writing at length about rejoicing in the attributes of God, Brakel wrote by way of application,

It is essential that one considers God to be His God in Christ. The light of the knowledge of the glory of God is to be found in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6). Outside of Christ God is a terror, and can only be viewed as a consuming fire. In Christ, however, one may have liberty; and God reveals Himself to such who approach unto Him that way. Then one will be able to better endure the light of God’s countenance, rejoice in it, and therein to glorify God. (1.138)

As we quoted earlier with respect to Brakel’s good news of great joy, he wrote, “In His goodness God has revealed a way by which a condemnable sinner can be reconciled with, and enjoy God... The Lord Jesus Christ is this way” (2.601).

Brakel exulted in Christ’s person. As God the Son, he has “the same life” as the Father, “the same life, manifesting the same all-sufficient activity and the same singular, energizing power” by virtue of his eternal generation (1.163). The Divine-human Person of the Mediator overflows with “preciousness;” he is “sweet... altogether lovely... the brightness of His Father’s

¹⁹ “All contemplation of God apart from Christ he considers to be fictitious and forbidden.” de Reuver, 258.

glory." "He who delights in holiness must find delight in Him... If there is therefore anything that will beget and stir up love within you, it must be the Lord Jesus" (3.285-86).

Every aspect of Christ's work becomes like a panel of a marvelous stained glass window through which the perfections of God shines upon believers for their joy (2.94-95). The Incarnation should draw believers to join the angels in "joyously magnifying God... If our soul should rejoice in anything, it ought to rejoice in this great and wondrous work of God" (1.514). Reflecting on the intimate union of our human nature with God in Christ will lead us to "lose ourselves in holy adoration, joyously approve of this," even to attain to a "rapturous frame" (1.511). The Incarnation manifests the perfections of God for our delight, such as his righteousness, love, veracity, wisdom, power, and glory (1.513).

Christ's voluntary humiliation makes his people to rejoice. The believer should engage himself in "sweet meditation upon the suffering of Christ" so that he would "rejoice more in the truth and perfection of the satisfaction accomplished by that suffering" (1.613). This is that looking to him who was pierced which the prophet foretold (Zec. 12:10). Brakel could even write of sweet shame in the shadow of the cross, "Oh, how sweet it is to be sensibly ashamed over our sins as being the cause of Christ's suffering... I truly rejoice that Thou hast taken my place, hast satisfied for my sins, and hast merited eternal life for me" (1.618).

Meditating on the exaltation of Christ is "the beginning of heaven, where the beholding of Christ in His glory will be the eternal joy and occupation of the elect, according to the prayer of Christ, 'Father, I will that they also, whom Thou hast given Me, be with Me where I am; that they may behold My glory, which Thou hast given me' (John 17:24)" (1.653). We see him as God "with experiential vision, presently experiencing and tasting the efficacy and sweetness of

these incomprehensible perfections” of the Deity. We see him as Mediator in full victory, worshiped by angels, feared by devils, trusted by Christians. “When a believer may attentively reflect upon all these matters, how frequently [his] heart will then be ignited in love. He will rejoice over Christ’s glory” (1.654-55). Brakel led his readers in a jubilant procession to the throne of the heavenly King, writing,

Since Jesus is King, everyone ought to honor Him as such. “That all men should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father” (John 5:23), for He is the King of glory (Psa. 24:10). In heaven all the angels worship Him (Heb. 1:6). All His subjects on earth must likewise worship Him. Such worship consists in considering His various attributes, the approval of them with sweet delight, a rejoicing that He is such a King, a losing oneself in holy adoration when viewing Him as such, and a bowing before Him in worship, “for He is thy Lord; and worship thou Him” (Psa. 45:11)...

Since Jesus is King, all and everyone of His subjects must delight in Him as such. God has instilled in the nature of these subjects that they delight in their King because of the majesty and eminence to be found in Him...

Wherever love for this King is active, there will be exceptional light, clarity, and delight within the soul. The soul looks to Him, beholds Him, and meditates and reflects upon His glory and preciousness, rejoicing that Jesus is so highly exalted and is crowned with honor and glory. Such a soul wholeheartedly desires this to be so, and delights to see how all the angels bow before Him and worship Him; how all the godly in radiating their love end in Him as their focal point; how the devils tremble before Him; and how all things are in His hand and must be subservient to Him. Of such reflection the soul can never have enough, and it grieves him that so often it is dark within, and that he must stand so far away. How he wishes to behold Him with more clarity and in closer proximity, and to be satiated with the brilliance of His glory! Such a soul exalts Him above all and has a high esteem for His majesty, which is delightful and awe-inspiring, and stirs up in him extraordinary reverence... His will is the soul’s will, and it is the greatest delight of such to do and refrain from doing as pleases Him. Oh, how the soul longs for immediate communion with Him, to behold Him face to face, and to sink away eternally in this mutual and perfect love! Already on this side of the grave, the name of Jesus is written with golden letters in his heart. (1.569-70)

It is impossible to overstate the significance of communion with Christ in Brakel’s theology. Union and communion with Christ and his Church “comprehend all true felicity” (2.87). He wrote, “Believers on earth love Him, their hearts go out after Him, and He is the

focal point of the passions of their love... All their asking, crying, and weeping is for Jesus. In Jesus only do they find all their satisfaction... If you were to cut my heart in a thousand pieces, on each piece you would find the name Jesus written with golden letters” (3.288).

Bartel Elshout writes, “For à Brakel the name of Jesus is sweeter than honey; you can almost sense the inner stirrings of his soul when he exalts Jesus as the Father’s unspeakable gift to fallen sons and daughters of Adam.”²⁰ Brakel truly wrote what his soul knew. Arie de Reuver notes that as Brakel was dying, “He repeated many times, just as his teacher Voetius had done on his deathbed, the lines from a Latin poem ascribed to Bernard: ‘*O Jesu mi dulcissime, Spes suspirantis animae*’ (‘O, my most sweet Jesus, Hope of a gasping soul.’).”²¹ Brakel knew Christ as the Mediator of joy. We next turn our attention to his doctrine of the church.

V. Church: The Community of Joy

It may seem odd to discuss Brakel’s view of the church before his doctrine of salvation, but in so doing we follow Brakel’s own order in *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*. He may have chosen to rearrange the normal order of theological topics out of pastoral concerns. Elshout explains, “Brakel was leery of the individualism, unbiblical mysticism, and denial of the organic nature of the church that was infecting the Reformed Church of the Netherlands.”²²

We will first examine Brakel’s teaching on joy with regard to relationships in the local congregation, and secondly with regard to the Lord’s Supper.

²⁰ Elshout, 22.

²¹ de Reuver, 234.

²² Elshout, 24.

Congregation: The Fellowship of Joy

One might think that Brakel's emphasis on personal communion with God would lead to isolation for the sake of private contemplation. But Brakel's ecclesiology was wedded to his Christology just as the church is wedded to Christ. The prime motive which he advanced to join the true church is that Christ "is so precious, glorious, and full of salvation." The glory and joy of Christ in his church moved Brakel to exclaim, "Ought not everyone therefore to delight himself in Zion, and be desirous to be a member of this church?" (2.57-58). The delights of participation in the church flow from communion with Christ. "As believers have communion with their Head Jesus Christ, they likewise have communion with each other" (2.97). "They who belong to the true church ought to rejoice, exclaiming, "Christ is here!" for Christ only dwells in the true church" (2.3, cf. 33). Brakel goes so far as to say, "the very essence of the church, which gathers in an external form, is union with Christ and each other by the Holy Spirit" (2.12). Therefore, "they cherish the church above their chief joy upon earth" (2.100).

God anoints all the duties of church membership with the oil of gladness. Christians should remember their baptism with rejoicing (2.521-22). Attentive listening to discriminating preaching should cause the converted to rejoice and walk worthily with spiritual joy (2.182). The peacemaker finds delight in peaceful unity in the church like a fish delighting in water (4.94). Brakel connected this joy with the presence of the Lord with the peacemaker (4.100). Exhorting others with the truth stirs the believer himself with more faith and joy (1.534). The repentance of a person under church discipline leads to joy in the church just as there is joy in heaven (2.163). Church officers may take up their work with the joy of being God's honored servants and will be rewarded with the joy of their Master (2.152, 155).

Therefore, Brakel taught that those who see with spiritual eyes will “be ignited with love for the congregation” (2.652). Just as Brakel’s theology sings of God, so it sings of God’s church, for the congregation is the house of the Lord:

The church is “...the joy of the whole earth” (Psa. 48:2) and “...a praise in the earth” (Isa. 62:7). It is the chief joy of God’s children—yes, it exceeds all that is joyful. “If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy” (Psa. 137:5-6)... His only desire upon earth was to be where the church was. “One thing have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life” (Psa. 27:4). (2.648)

Lord's Supper: The Feast of Joy

If the church is the house of God, then the Lord’s Supper is the feast prepared by God in his house. Brakel taught that the Lord’s Supper required an intense season of preparation, an intentional mindset of participation, and a grateful experience of reflection (ch. 41; 2.569-600). Brakel viewed the Supper as supernatural event wrapped in Trinitarian mysticism, a seal of covenant fellowship. He wrote,

The meeting place where the Lord’s Supper is administered is at that moment none other than a portal of heaven... Heaven opens itself in such a place, and rays of divine glory and grace descend to that place, filling it with the very presence of God. The Father comes to his people with His favor and reveals Himself in a familiar manner... The Lord Jesus, the Bridegroom, comes in His love to them to have this supper with them and to cause them to enjoy it together with Him... It is there that the Holy Spirit is active, filling the soul with light, grace, and comforts. (2.573)

God’s spiritual revelations at the table can “at times bring them into ecstasy” (2.575).

But Brakel warned against expecting unusual experiences there. “Neither expect a miracle here nor an extraordinary measure of elevation, light, or ecstatic joy. If the Lord gives you this, enjoy this good thing while it may be your portion” (2.592). Nevertheless, it is a spiritual duty to rejoice by faith when taking the Supper: “Since the Lord Jesus has instituted this sacrament as

a seal, believers must use it as such, and they, upon receiving the sacrament, must consider themselves as being sealed and rejoice in their temporal and eternal blessedness" (2.534).

Having considered the church as the community of covenantal joy, we turn next to Brakel's teaching on personal salvation.

VI. Salvation: The Life of Joy

Under the heading of salvation falls the entire Christian life in this age. Space does not permit us to investigate Brakel's whole doctrine of the Christian life here. However the thesis of this paper is: *Joy in God is central and pervasive to true religion in the theology of Wilhelmus à Brakel*. To establish this, we must touch on several aspects of the Christian life.

Conversion: The Return to Joy

We saw that Brakel taught the misery of fallen man. After breaching the covenant of works, mankind stands in a state of alienation from the all-sufficient God. Himself an empty vessel, man thus runs after creatures in a futile pursuit of happiness. His destiny in such a condition is to fall under the everlasting wrath of the Almighty. What then can give man joy?

Sinful man must be reconciled to God. We will consider in the next section how the gospel of reconciliation brings believers joy. In this section we note that for Brakel, conversion consists of turning back to God as our true felicity. In this he followed the Reformed Church. The Heidelberg Catechism (Q.90) queries, "What is the coming-to-life of the new self?" and answers, "It is wholehearted joy in God through Christ and a strong desire to live according to the will of God in all good works."²³

²³ <http://www.puritanseminary.org/media/HeidelbergCatechism.pdf>, accessed 5-24-2010.

Similarly, joy was central to conversion in Brakel's thought. Repentance is sweet surrender. Brakel exhorted, "Therefore have mercy upon your own soul, wake up, hate the devil and his work, flee from him, bid his kingdom farewell, and surrender yourself to the sweet, easy, and lovely government of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1.303). Brakel taught that there was a great difference between proper mourning over sin and "habitual melancholy" (2.466).

Faith includes delight in the promises of the covenant. In the midst of his definition of the covenant of grace, Brakel wrote, "In this covenant God promises deliverance from all evil and the bestowal of full salvation by grace through the Mediator Jesus Christ. Man, fully delighting himself in these promises, with all his heart acquiesces in and accepts the way revealed in the Word of God, whereby these promised benefits are to be obtained" (1.429).

Man's response to the covenant consists of his personal "consent" to God's offer. This is a reversal of Adam's choice in the fall, a turning back to God as one's sole happiness. Brakel wrote, "If a man, who now correctly understands the conditions,²⁴ has a heartfelt desire for them, believes the truth of the offer, turns away from all other things to God alone, and quietly, truthfully, and joyfully declares his acquiescence in this covenant, surrendering himself thereby to God in Christ, then the covenant has thus been made and will eternally endure" (1.442). We remember that Brakel emphasized that the covenant offers one blessing above and in all its promises, namely God himself. Brakel believed that a true believer should be able to see in his own soul that "he is enamored with being truly united to God" (1.581).

²⁴ Brakel used the term "conditions" as a synonym for "promises" of the covenant (1.434ff).

Justification & Adoption: The Foundation of Joy

Brakel defined spiritual joy in a manner which intertwined it with reconciliation with God:

This spiritual joy consists in a delightful motion of the soul, generated by the Holy Spirit in the heart of believers, whereby He convinces them of the felicity of their state, causes them to enjoy the benefits of the covenant of grace, and assures them of their future felicity... This joy pertains to being reconciled with God—to their being the recipients of His grace, goodness, love, and benevolence, He being their God and Father, their portion, delight, rest, keeper, and felicity, and Jesus Christ being their Savior. (2.456-57)

The soul of reconciliation with God, indeed the “soul of Christianity,” is justification.²⁵

So justification is the foundation of joy. Brakel wrote, “Justification also engenders joy. ‘I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for He hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, He hath covered me with the robe of righteousness’ (Isa. 61:10)” (2.455).

Brakel commanded believers, “do not condemn yourself if God justifies you... To do this would be to bring anguish upon yourself, since the Lord does not cause you grief.” Instead, “the voice of divine acquittal in God’s Word, and by His Spirit in the heart, is so sweet” (2.412). This is an experience in which believers must grow. Brakel wrote, “The stronger that faith in Christ is... the more clearly the believer will hear the pronouncement of the justifying sentence by the righteous Judge, and the greater the measure of peace and joy will be” (2.614-15).

In Brakel’s theology “justification includes spiritual sonship,” or adoption (2.415). Here the believer finds abundant material for joy (2.420-21). Brakel exulted,

To be a child of a king is a great thing in this world... What then must it be to be a child of God Himself who has all glory within Himself, is above all praise, and has made everything? Everything belongs to Him; all creatures and all kings of the earth must be at His service and His beck, and must obey Him to the minutest detail; He accomplishes all He wills, is nothing but love and goodness; and all that He is, He is for His children. (2.417)

²⁵ “Having discussed calling, regeneration, and faith, we shall now proceed to justification, which is the soul of Christianity and the fountainhead of all true comfort and sanctification” (2.340).

Assurance: The Evidence of Joy

In the last section we have already considered how an assurance of one's justification and adoption leads to joy. Brakel similarly regarded an assurance of election to be "the fountain of much joy in God" (1.246, cf. 248). He could even write, "to be without assurance concerning his state prevents him from rejoicing in God" (4.208). Assurance leads to joy.

Now in this section we will consider how joy leads to assurance. When Brakel wrote about assurance of election, he listed the following among other evidences that God elected and called a person: "willingness and obedience, spiritual liberty, and joy in the Lord... delight in God's counsel to reconcile sinners to Himself through the Surety, the Lord Jesus Christ... an inner delight and love for a godly spiritual frame and the practice of all virtues in the fear, love, and obedience of God, as being His will... delight in communion with God" (1.247-248).

There is a double joy for the believer. Joy in Christ leads by way of evidence to the joy of assurance. Brakel counseled, "You who yearn for Jesus... so that He is all your joy and desire, generating in you a hatred towards sin... you have reason to be assured that He has been born for you. Therefore you have double reason to rejoice with delightful and unspeakable joy" (1.516; cf. 2.581; 4:480). Just as assurance is distinct from saving faith in Christ and is a fruit of such faith (2.276; 4.214), so also the joy of assurance is a distinct fruit of rejoicing in Christ himself. Joy in Christ is of the essence of saving faith (2.326). Joy in assurance is not. To insist otherwise is a "snare" which deprives believers "from being encouraged and joyful" (4.216).

Brakel did warn that there was counterfeit religious joy (2.322). He wrote, "temporal believers have a joy without root" (2.293; cf. Mat. 13:20; Luke 8:13). Brakel distinguished between true joy and false joy in three ways (2.459-60). First, true joy comes through faith in

Christ by the operation of the Holy Spirit (1 Pet. 1:8). Second, true joy comes from communion with God as our reconciled God, not merely in God's benefits to us (Phi. 4:4). Third, true joy makes a soul holy (Psa. 119:32). The unconverted rejoice in sin (2.603; 3:271). The child of God finds obedience to the Father's will to be a delight, not a burden (2.429, 432, 435; 3.304-305). In other words, for joy in God to qualify as evidence of salvation it must include rejoicing in God's will because it is his will.

Love & Obedience: The Sacrifice of Joy

Christ taught his disciples that the heart of God's law consisted of love (Mat. 22:35-40). So Brakel wrote, "The contents of the law is love" (3.263). He did not try to change the Great Commandment into, "Rejoice in the Lord." Yet Brakel wrote twice, "there is joy in love," that is, in love for the Lord (3.266, 287). Joy is an aspect of the essential activity of love. Brakel wrote,

Love in essence has no other object than that which is most eminent, most cherishable, most satisfying, and unchangeable—which is God Himself... Love is the sweet motion of the heart toward God—infused into the hearts of believers by the Holy Spirit—whereby they, by virtue of union with Him and in view of His perfections, delight themselves in God, and in a joyous embrace of His will, fully surrendering themselves to His service. (3.263-64)

The love of God does not beget casual irreverence to him. Instead, "there is reverence in love" (1.266). So too it is "the fear of God" which "qualifies this joy as being true" (2.460). This combination of fear and joy marks "a childlike heart" towards the heavenly Father (2.436). Brakel distinguished between "slavish fear" and "filial fear" (that of a son) toward God. Childlike fear of God springs from a glad love for his majesty (3.293). Brakel explained, "Reverence requires... a knowledge of and beholding of God's majesty... a delightful acknowledgement and a whole hearted approbation that God is so majestic." (3.294).

From a sense of the Divine majesty flows the believer's glad submission to God's will.

Brakel opened his book with the principles that,

First, the foundation of religion is the character of God... the creature is obligated to God's majesty to exist for the purpose of serving God... Second, the form or essence of religion consists of man's knowledge, recognition, and heart-felt endorsement of this binding obligation, which is to live unto God at all times and in all things with all that he is and is capable of performing... He does so because He is his God, it is his obligation, and it constitutes his felicity. (1.3-4)

Doing God's will is the felicity of man. This is a function of love. Love for God and his will injects joy into all the duties of obedience, whether viewed as holiness (1.441), self-sacrifice (3.268), self-denial (3.397, 402), diligence (4.104), or humility (4.68).

Trials & Hope: The Training for Joy

Sorrow is the only pathway to eternal joy. Brakel wrote, "By way of various trials and sorrows, it pleases the only wise God to lead His elect, who have presently been regenerated, to the felicity which He has ordained for them and which Christ has merited" (2.615). When God's providential will opposes our will, Brakel counseled his readers to rejoice that God is Lord, not us. He wrote, "Since He is sovereign, however, His will is supreme, and you approve of it with delight, subject your will to His will, and will what He wills. Delight yourself in your circumstances, since it is the will of God concerning you" (3.391). In the light of predestination: "All these trials and tribulations proceed from love and are for your good" (1.249).

To be sure, trouble takes away joy. "Adversity presses the soul down, robs her of a joyous and cheerful disposition, oppresses the heart... both discouragement and despair are very near at hand" (2.616). But "by faith in the promises," the child of God sees that God

makes him holy by trials, so: "The cross will then be sweet and light even if it may press tears from our eyes" (2.616-17). We must rejoice in God's will through our tears (3.383; 4.178).

Is it all your delight, in willing obedience, to live a life pleasing to the Lord? Is it your choice that the Lord be your only and all-sufficient portion, and to delight yourself in the Lord? Do you have eternal life as your objective, and do you lay hold on it? Therefore choose then also the way of the cross... bear it courageously and be comforted in it— yes, bear it joyously. (2.618).

The promises engender hope that trials lead to greater joys. Patient hope is essential to strengthen believers in all their troubles (3.413). Brakel wrote,

Hope rejoices the heart; man cannot live without happiness. However, in the world the godly endure many tribulations, and if they had nothing but tribulation they would succumb. All that man strives for is related to happiness, for a joyful heart begets strength for soul and body. Hope, however, causes the believer to "glory in tribulations (Rom. 5:3), and there is thus a "rejoicing in hope" (Rom. 12:12). (3.329)

At the heart of patient hope is treasuring God above all things. Believers "would rather enjoy communion with God with the cross, than to be estranged from him without the cross" (3.423). Spiritual reflection consists not only in choosing God, but in despising the world by comparison. Brakel said, "This means that God alone is your desire, resting place, joy, delight, and the One whom I fear. The world is therefore from now on, of no significance. It is merely to be used as a means through which you traverse as a stranger in order to come to the fatherland" (2.598). Choosing the Sovereign Lord as one's happiness makes one meek (4.81).

Delight & Darkness: The Pursuit of Joy

Joy is not accidental to the Christian life, a mere by-product of obedience. Joy is the will of God. Brakel asserted, "God is pleased with the joy of His children. It is His will that they delight themselves, value the benefits, fully trust in His Word and in His promise, jubilate, leap for joy, and sing His praises with joyful and singing lips" (2.463). But the believer should not be

distressed if he lacks strong emotions. Brakel counseled, "One can have a true and genuine love which is very strong—even if he does not have sweet and sensible passions" (3.281).

Nevertheless the redeemed soul "is desirous to live continually in union with Christ and to be continually in amazement about, and to rejoice in, the great work of redemption" (2.615).

The pursuit of joy conjoins sovereign grace and human responsibility. On the one hand, joy can only be "generated by the Holy Spirit" (2.456). It is a work of grace. On the other hand, believers have a responsibility to seek spiritual joy for their strength and God's glory (2.461-62). The enjoyment of God's glory stands at the head of the wise man's goals. Brakel wrote, "The objective which the prudent person has in mind is manifold: to enjoy and glorify God; to have peace and joy in God; and love toward God; to exercise holiness; to refrain from sin... to be instrumental in the conversion of one's neighbor" (4.130).

One of God's strangest ways of dealing with his people is spiritual desertion (4.171). Brakel taught that the Lord sometimes sovereignly withdraws the normal operations of his Spirit to illuminate and comfort his children, leaving them in partial darkness (4.173). Spiritual darkness is a reality in some believers (1.190; 4.260-61). Darkness may result in the experience of "deadness," which the translator explained as "a death-like state of insensibility" (4.265, 268).²⁶ The Lord may desert his people to darkness merely out of his sovereign freedom for his glory (4.179). Or he may desert them temporarily for their sins, such as scandalous acts, worldliness, pride, neglecting the means of grace, or seeking novel doctrines (4.182-83; cf.

²⁶ Brakel placed his chapter on darkness immediately before his chapter on deadness, commenting in the former, "When someone comes into a state of darkness, he will readily slip into a state in which he is cold, stiff, and insensitive. We shall shortly discuss this state of insensitivity more comprehensively" (4.262-63). Therefore Brakel regarded "deadness" to be a potential result of "darkness."

3.466). In such cases, the believer should wholeheartedly repent of the sin and rest in the blood of Jesus for forgiveness (4.189-90).

Whether the Christian is struggling under darkness, or seeking to enjoy God more, the pursuit of joy in God is essentially the same. Brakel gave the following guidelines (2.466-67):

- “Continually exercise faith in Christ” as revealed in the gospel of salvation.
- “Continue to read and acknowledge the Word to be what it really is: the Word of God,” with an eye to God’s unbreakable promises (cf. 1:75, 81).
- “Pray much, and acquaint yourself with the Lord by praying to Him, communing with Him” as the One who provides all that you desire. Steadfast devotional exercises in prayer is the means to receive more light (cf. 3.468-470; 4.264).
- “Engage much in holy contemplation and meditation.” Meditating on God and the gospel is the duty and beauty of all true worshipers (cf. 1.133-138; 2.582; 4:25-30).
- “Be much on guard against yielding to a sinful routine in your life. Even if there are no great falls, this yielding, this drowsy carelessness, and this departing from God will readily rob us of this joy.”

We have seen that joy in God permeates the whole Christian life, from conversion to perseverance through trials, from adoption to sacrificial obedience. Next we consider how Brakel viewed joy with respect to the ultimate destination of the Christian: eternal life.

VII. Eternal Felicity: The Consummation of Joy

Brakel favored the phrase “eternal felicity” to describe the ultimate glory of the elect, using it sixty times (e.g. 1.438). Happiness in God constituted the essence of heaven: “To be joyful in God is heaven” (2.464). The believer sips the cup of heaven in the midst of his earthly warfare. But in eternal glory awaits “magnificent happiness” (4.369). Though Brakel sometimes spoke of ecstasy on earth, Arie de Reuver notes that he also displayed a wise “eschatological reserve,” that is, reserving the highest experiences of joy for the coming age.²⁷

²⁷ de Reuver, 239.

Brakel reasoned from the doctrine of God that heaven must be incomprehensibly good:

That which the only wise and omnipotent God has conceived and thought out within Himself (let me speak as a man), namely, to exalt man to the highest level of felicity, fill him with incomprehensible glory and delight, and glorify Himself in His saints and be admired in all them that believe (2 Th. 1:10), must be glorious to the highest degree. (4.362)

Christians of all times have meditated on the coming kingdom of God as the consummation of all man's desires. We have already noted the link between Brakel and the medieval mystic Bernard of Clairvaux.²⁸ Bernard waxed lyrical about the pleasures of the heavenly wedding feast. Christ will make his Bride completely intoxicated with God.

Hence, complete satisfaction without interruption; hence, everlasting and insatiable desire that lacks nothing; hence, that sober drunkenness (*sobria ebrietas*) that refreshes itself with the Truth and not with drink (*vero, non mero*), drenched with wine, but radiant with God (*non madens vino, sed ardens Deo*).²⁹

Similarly the Reformed tradition exulted in hope in the glory of God. The Heidelberg Catechism says:

Question 58. How does the article concerning "life everlasting" comfort you?

Answer. Even as I already now experience in my heart the beginning of eternal joy, so after this life I will have perfect blessedness such as no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no human heart has ever imagined: a blessedness in which to praise God forever.³⁰

When Christ comes again, he will bring his people that for which their desires were created, "the enjoyment of the infinite" (4.365). Christ will give his elect possession of that to which the whole gospel points, "eternal felicity" (2.605). Brakel exclaimed, "Oh, how sweet it

²⁸ "In my opinion one can speak of a substantive congeniality with Bernard's mystical spirituality... That he had direct knowledge of the corpus of Bernard's work is not obvious to me. It is possible that his thought-world... was conveyed to him by his teacher Voetius and his spiritual kinsman Witsius." de Reuver, 257-58.

²⁹ de Reuver, 57.

³⁰ <http://www.puritanseminary.org/media/HeidelbergCatechism.pdf>, accessed 5-24-2010.

shall be to sit eternally under the shadow of the almighty, good, loving, all-sufficient, and benevolent God!" (4.365). Their inheritance is incomprehensibly good. Brakel wrote,

They are heirs of a possession which is far more excellent than heaven and earth with all its creatures... God Himself is their inheritance: "The LORD is my portion" (Lam. 3:24). It is incomprehensible and inexpressible what this is. No one can comprehend this unless he has enjoyed in some measure what it will be when the soul, with full satisfaction, will enjoy God in an immediate sense. Of this we can say nothing else but, Oh, how great this is! (2.427)

Consistent with the Bible's teaching on rewards, Brakel taught both the full happiness of all the elect, and the relative differences among the elect in glory. He wrote,

We maintain that all they who are glorified will be filled with felicity to overflowing; that is, as much as they can endure. Thus, there will neither be a desire for more, nor will this be possible... As one vessel can, however, contain more than another vessel, while yet all being full, we believe that also the one will excel the other in glory. This is, however, not due to merit... Rather, on the basis of His free grace, God will elevate in glory those who have done or suffered much as a witness for His Name. (4.358)

What does their happiness and glory consist of? "Felicity consists in seeing God." Jesus, the God-man, will be seen "with physical eyes with overwhelming joy and love by all the citizens of heaven." Brakel continued, "God, however, will be seen with the enlightened eyes of the understanding... God in an immediate and immanent manner—in a manner which God presently has not made known to us—will reveal His glorious perfections to His children, will cause the soul to experience that He is her portion." This vision of God does not consist in "mere reflection" in the intellect but also "the enjoyment of mutual and perfect love." "God will fill the soul with His all-sufficiency, encompass it with His love, and overshadow it with all His perfections... inexpressible joy" (4.365-67).

Brakel's held out the hope of being "satisfied in the Lord's all-sufficiency" to brothers facing severe persecution and martyrdom. They should weigh this against their sufferings:

The inheritance of the saints in glory, the immediate communion with God, the life of beholding Him, to be satisfied with the Lord's all-sufficiency, to be irradiated by the light of His countenance, to be embraced by His love, to be surrounded by His omnipotence, to be filled with His goodness, even to shine forth in pure holiness, to be aflame with love, to be incomprehensibly joyful in God, to be among the angels, to be in the company of the souls of the most perfectly righteous men, and while being in His immediate presence, together with them behold and experience the perfections of the Lord, and thus magnify and praise these perfections—that is felicity and that is glory. (3.370)

VIII. Conclusion

After having surveyed Brakel's writings on the major *loci* of theology, we may conclude that the thesis of this paper is established, namely that: *Joy in God is central and pervasive to true religion in the theology of Wilhelmus à Brakel.* God is the fullness of joy. Man is the seeker of joy. Christ is the mediator of joy. The Church is the community of joy. Salvation is the life of joy. Eternity is the consummation of joy.

Brakel's covenant theology dripped with joy because in the covenant the all-sufficient God gives to his people nothing less than himself. We close this paper with his golden words,

Did not God, by saying, "I am your God!" cause Himself to be your portion so that you would enjoy all felicity in Him? If you have the all-sufficient One as your salvation, are you then still in need of anything else? Is He not better to you than a thousand worlds, a piece of money, or a piece of bread? Therefore, speak and practice what the godly did. "The Lord is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in Him" (Lam. 3:24). As you consider God—the only blessed God, the God of full salvation—to be your portion, turn to Him in times of distress, take refuge with Him, delight yourself in Him by faith—even if it pleases Him not to give you the measure of enjoying Him as you would desire. This is laid away for you in eternity. Delight yourself in having Him as your portion, and let this satisfy you while foregoing the things of the world which you would desire to have. To that end, hold before yourself the example of Habakkuk: "Although ... the fields shall yield no meat ... yet I will rejoice in the Lord" (Hab. 3:17-18). (3.391-92)

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