

THE IMAGE OF GOD AND THE LAW OF GOD*

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The Psalmist asks of Jehovah, "What is man that Thou art mindful of him? And the son of man that Thou visitest him?" And, answering his own question he says, "For Thou hast made him but little lower than God, and crownest him with glory and honor." (Ps 8:4-5)

Miracle of miracles is man! Most helpless of all God's creatures in infancy; most powerful when fully developed; and interesting always.¹

When the question is asked today: What is man? the answer is usually given that he is a "thinking animal." When the child of God asks this question, he must answer on the basis of Scripture that he is the image of God. It is true that modern man speaks of the "dignity" of man, but it is difficult to tell what is meant by this "dignity." On the one hand man must bow to the lower creation—witness the halting of all work to improve man's condition in a certain place so that the snail darter may live and multiply, and environmentalists often raise a hue and cry when animals are used in laboratory experiments to improve the health and life of man. On the other hand, the lowest criminal is upheld in his rights so that the dignity of man may not be lost. These conflicting views do not give evidence of a clear picture of the nature and essence of man. We may not allow the humanist to give us a definition of who man is, nor is philosophy able to give us the answer. The answer must come from the Scriptures; and theology has busied itself with this problem for many years.

We must return to the creation of all things to find answers to the problems which bother us even today. A clear description is given us in Genesis 1 of all the things which God made in the beginning. All creatures were made in such a way that He could say, "Behold it is very good." But with the creation of man something else comes

into view. God first speaks of His intent. He is going to make man "after our likeness and in our image." Immediately following this expression of intent we read of the fulfillment of this intention: "And God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them." (Gen 1:26-27) The fact of man's creation in the image of God is therefore clearly established, and every theologian must take note of it. The problems attending it and the interrelationship with various other doctrines must be studied by both the exegete and dogmatician. Virtually all Reformed, Lutheran and Catholic dogmaticians have dealt with this subject. This essay only seeks to point up some of the problems involved in this area and to stimulate others to engage in further study of the ramifications of this most important doctrine.

A humanistic view of man will not help us solve the problems concerning his origin, nature, being and purpose. A Biblical and theological anthropology is the only one which can help man to understand himself in any age. The second *locus* of dogmatics already deals with this problem, and rightly so. Our *Theology* must be correct before we begin with the study of man; but Barth does not help us either when he seeks to explain anthropology in the light of Christology.

What do we mean when we speak of the image of God? We mean first of all that man is a copy of the Original! Calvin mentions that the angels also bear the image of God.² It means that man stands in the closest relation to the God Who created him.³ The early church fathers and later the Scholastics believed that there was a difference between the image and the likeness of which Genesis 1 speaks. The Reformers and virtually all the Reformed dogmaticians since their time have rejected this distinction. The Bible uses the words interchangeably. It should also be observed that it is more correct to speak of man as the *image of God* rather than the *image bearer of God*.

One of the elements in the study of the Image of God which has caused a great deal of debate is the question concerning the broader and narrower sense in which we are to look upon this image of God. Bavinck said, 'The whole man is the image of the whole Godhead.'⁴ He herewith touches upon two matters which he considers very important in this discussion. In the first place, he does not want his followers to view the image of God in man as being the image of any one Person of the Trinity. Secondly, he wants to emphasize the fact that man in both body and soul is the image of

God. Berkhof agrees with this view, and so do A. Kuyper, Jr. and G.C. Berkouwer. These theologians have come to the conclusion that the image of God is the *essence* of man. They realize that there are various problems attending this point of view. There are other theologians of note who do not believe that the body also belongs to the image of God. Augustine believed that the image refers only to the intellectual element in man and the likeness refers to his moral faculties. Klaas Schilder also denied the distinction between the "wider" and "narrower" in the image of God and said that this distinction cannot be supported by Scripture.⁵ Schilder would rather distinguish between creation and image. The actual image lies in the office, the *officium*, which created man receives. According to him the image is expressed in a dynamic and close fellowship with the God of the covenant. And, said Schilder, the image exists only when that close contact, that communication, that loving relationship exists.

Herman Hoeksema also disagreed with those who make the distinction between the broader and narrower sense of the image of God. He said, "Now it must be remembered that this distinction is not confessionally Reformed."⁶ He warned that to make this distinction is not without danger to true doctrine, that this view would leave room for the idea that there are remnants of the image of God left in fallen man and therefore natural man cannot be wholly depraved. Hoeksema believed that the Forms of Unity rather favor the idea of the image of God as limited to man's original integrity, true knowledge of God, righteousness and holiness.⁷

Those who oppose this fairly common distinction cannot be easily brushed aside. Their theological ability and firmness of Reformed conviction is well-known. They have wrestled with a real problem and their views must be considered carefully.

The various distinctions which have been made in dogmatics usually serve to clarify certain things, but when considered more closely may also stand in the way of a proper understanding of the truth. The distinctions which have been made in dogmatics concerning the church may well be used as an example. These distinctions may be helpful, but they are neither Biblically nor confessionally based. There may also be something of this in the doctrine of the Image of God. The question which must be asked before making distinctions is: Does the image of God refer to the *essence* of man or does it not? If it does, as many Reformed theologians suggest, then distinctions such as wider and narrower sense lose some of their meaning.

Man is made in the image of God. This is the clear statement of Scripture. It does not speak of his soul being made in the image of God, but the whole man, body and soul. Surely there are problems connected with this view. God is pure Spirit of infinite perfection. How can man, in his body, be the image of Him who is only spiritual? Yet, though spirit, this God creates material things. It is true that man has many qualities in common with the animal body, but there are also great differences. The emphasis on *Man*, body and soul, being made in the image of God also rescues us from the fundamentalist position that Christ came to save *souls*! The Bible and Reformed theology have always emphasized that He came to save *men*.

That man is made a moral creature is denied by no one in the Reformed camp either now or in the past. Yet even here there are problems of some import. Surely righteousness and holiness are readily recognized as moral concepts. Is true knowledge also a moral concept? We believe it is. The Bible, in speaking of knowledge in the highest sense, does not speak of it as something only intellectual, but as a love knowledge. "This is eternal life that they may know Thee and Him Whom Thou has sent, even Jesus Christ." (Jn 17:3) Man is a moral creature in all the faculties of his soul. So he came forth out of the hand of the Creator endowed with true knowledge, righteousness and holiness. He received a body so that he might be able to exercise dominion over the whole creation of God. Perhaps we are now able to understand better what one of the most able theologians of a former generation said concerning this whole matter: "Genesis 1:26 is one of the most mysterious passages in all of Scripture. For man since the fall it is a deep secret, but we cannot analyze it, but we must understand it and respond to it in adoration."⁸

The problem is compounded by what we read in Genesis 1:27. "And God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them." No one doubts, of course, that the woman was created in the image of God as well as the man; but does this verse have something to say in regard to the further development of that image of God? Can He only be represented by the two (male and female) *together*? Is it analogous to the many names which the Bible ascribes to God because His being cannot be adequately revealed in one or two names? Does the fact that He places male and female side by side in this text have something to say in regard to marriage? These are the questions which merit further study. Then we also approach the beautiful

symbolism which the Apostle Paul uses to describe marriage. It is like the union of Christ and His church. The groom is to represent Christ and the bride the church. For that reason mixed marriage is condemned. Neither the groom nor the bride is a symbol of Christ or the church. They were created in His image and must show it forth.

Another important question in the whole discussion of the image of God in man is whether or not that image has been lost after the fall into sin or whether man always retains it. To some extent the answer is found in the definition which one gives to the image of God. Is that image the essence of man? I say the answer is found to some extent in this definition, because some who believe that man has indeed lost that image through the fall into sin do not believe that he has ceased to be man. Schilder, for example, did not deny that man though fallen into sin is still man.⁹ Hoeksema also believed that man has indeed lost that image in which he was created. Not only could it be lost through the fall, but through the fall it changed into its opposite. Adam had freedom in Paradise. He was in the state of *posse non peccare*. This freedom was lost through the fall, and his state became *non posse non peccare*. He will through the redemption of Christ finally attain to *non posse peccare*. Hoeksema emphasized the fact that man lost the image of God completely.¹⁰ True freedom is the state in which a man's inner nature is in perfect accord with the law of God.¹¹

Both Schilder and Hoeksema sought to maintain the doctrine of total depravity, and argued that it could not be done if one considers fallen man still to be the image of God. Schilder said:

There are remnants of the original endowments of man. Man after the fall remained endowed with understanding and will and through this nature he can attain to some virtue and external discipline.

He warned against relativizing the apostasy of man because it would lead to the Roman Catholic doctrine of the *donum super additum*.¹² Hoeksema charged Kuyper's view of common grace and the Christian Reformed Synod of 1924 with serious and far-reaching weakening of the doctrine of the total corruption of man. The radical antithesis between the church and the world is surrendered, and the way to secularization is wide open. Contrary to the opinion of many, he did not deny what the Canons of Dort and the Belgic Confession say about the remaining remnants. He gives them a different interpretation and does not believe that there is grace involved in them. He wants to maintain the total depravity of

man. According to him, that man retained remnants of natural light means that man has remained a rational moral being and can "distinguish between good and evil."¹³

It cannot be denied, however, that Genesis 9:6 and James 3:9 still speak of the image of God remaining in man long after the fall had taken place. Most exegetes agree that Genesis 9:6 teaches that it is precisely because man is God's image that he may not be slain and a very severe penalty is prescribed for those who take a man's life. To take the life of a man is something quite different than taking the life of an animal or bird or fish. "Ye are of more value than many sparrows." (Mt 10:31) Again, in James 3:9 the Apostle speaks of the utter inconsistency of the evil tongue: "For with the tongue we confess the Lord and Father and with that same tongue we curse men who were made in the likeness of God." Schilder dismissed this argument rather lightly, saying that Genesis 9:6 and James 3:9 refer to man's lofty origin, to what he once was; they do not imply at all that fallen man now retains the image of God. C. Vonk comes to a similar conclusion in *De Voorzeide Leer* (III, 346). However, Schilder was a strong defender of capital punishment and yet removed one of its strongest Scriptural warrants.

Does humanness belong to the image of God? The theologians cited above do not deny man's humanness even after the fall. If the image of God is the essence of man, must it then not be declared that he would cease to be man if that image was lost? It is of course true that man still has reason and a sense of right and wrong. What is the origin of these traits? It must also be admitted at once that man no longer has *true* knowledge or righteousness. At the same time, he was not bestialized through the fall nor demonized.¹⁴ He indeed lost that communion with God which Adam possessed. The living God still concerns Himself with the life of man.¹⁵

Although fully appreciating the contributions of Schilder and Hoeksema to this discussion, and mindful of the fact that one's conclusion in regard to this question has many ramifications in the field of anthropology, this writer believes that man has not lost the image of God. The term which has been used by Reformed dogmaticians since earliest times is the word *vitiated*, i.e., that the image was *spoiled* through the fall into sin. Theologians such as Calvin, Bavinck, Berkhof and Berkouwer do not see how anyone can say that man has *lost* the *Imago Dei*. They are fully aware of the fact that the total depravity and total corruption of man must be maintained, but this can be done while still holding to the present reality of the image of God in man. The Lord still deals with

man as a responsible being, giving to him His revelation so that he may know his God, the way of salvation through Jesus Christ, and himself. It is perhaps dangerous to say with Bavinck that the essence of man is found in his being the *Imago Dei* and that he is *mikrotheos* and *mikrokosmos* together.¹⁶ He believed that the image of God consists of everything that is human in man.¹⁷ Those who believe that the image of God in man has not been lost are just as anxious to preserve the true Reformed position on the nature of the fallenness of man as those who deny that this image is still present. It is perhaps easier to deny the present reality of the image, but we should not be afraid of the paradoxes which the Bible reveals to us. We certainly believe that nothing in man has escaped the ravages of sin. Immanuel Kant even spoke of the "radical evil" in man. In this statement this brilliant but by no means Christian philosopher comes close to the Reformed position. Man's sin is not on the periphery, but has struck the root, the *radix* of his existence.¹⁸

We may well ask: If man has lost the image of God, does he now have any characteristics whereby he is distinguished from the lower creatures? Or must we conclude with so many secularists that he is only a thinking animal? These remarks are not intended to identify those theologians in the Reformed camp who believe the image was lost through the fall with the secularists of our day, but the consequences of a position on this important matter must not be overlooked. The answers we give to the various questions associated with the doctrine of the image of God will influence our theology in many other areas. Reformed theology is of one fabric and one cannot touch it in any one particular place without also touching various other truths.

Whether one believes that the image of God in man has been lost, or whether he believes that it belongs to the very essence of his being and is therefore still present, everyone is agreed that this image must be restored in Christ. This is not an inconsistency on the part of those who believe man has retained it; they also believe that this image has been spoiled and tarnished and must therefore be restored to its pristine beauty. Man was to have dominion over the entire lower creation. Elements of this are still found, but the glory of man as the vice-gerent of God is not seen anymore. Paul addresses the relationship of man to the lower creation in Romans 8:19-23, where he clearly pictures to us the fact that the whole creation was placed under the "bondage of corruption" when its ruler and king fell. This lower creation will also be restored from under

this bond of corruption when man is restored, when he is redeemed. The creation of man was the crowning touch to the creation of God and his redemption will again restore that creation to the place it was supposed to have.

However, when we speak of the restoration of the image of God through the redemptive work of Christ, we must be careful not to fall into the error against which Bavinck warned, viz. that we consider this image in man to be the image of one particular person of the Godhead. But that man has to be restored is evident to all those who take sin and the depravity of man seriously. Calvin makes this crystal clear in his usual pithy language:

There is no doubt that Adam, when he fell from his dignity, was by this defection alienated from God. Wherefore, although we allow that the Divine image was not utterly annihilated and effaced in him, yet it was so corrupted that whatever remains is but horrible deformity. And therefore the beginning of our recovery and salvation is the restoration which we obtain through Christ, who on this account is called the second Adam; because he restores us to true and perfect integrity.¹⁹

Abraham Kuyper, Jr. summarized many of the things he had written in his book on the image of God by reminding us that Christ is the image of God (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15; Heb 13). God dwells in Christ bodily so that He is able to say, "Who hath seen me hath seen the Father." (Jn 14:7,9) He also emphasized that man was made in the image of God and not of Christ.²⁰ Hoeksema also emphasized that man's redemption in Christ is the restoration of the image of God (Eph 4:23-24; Col 3:9-10). In these passages the Apostle speaks of putting off the old man and putting on the new man.

How does Christ restore that image in man? What is redemption? This seemingly simple question may well be faced seriously by us today. Somehow Jesus saves! This is the message which is dinned into the ears of our people over the airwaves every day. How did He do it? Perhaps we should not even be so inquisitive, but simply accept it as a fact! The Scriptures do not leave us in the dark on this score and neither do our Confessions. The Heidelberg Catechism makes it very clear to us why He is Christ, that is, the anointed of God to the office of the Mediator of His people. *He restores the image of God in us!* That is the way He redeems. He did those things which were necessary to raise us again to the level from which we had fallen. "He is our Prophet and teacher, who has fully revealed

to us the secret counsel and will of God concerning our redemption; and our only High Priest, who by the one sacrifice of His body has redeemed us, and makes continual intercession for us with the Father; and our eternal King, who governs us by His Word and Spirit, and defends and preserves us in the salvation obtained for us."²¹ From this well-known answer of the Heidelberger it becomes clear that He restores us in all those qualities with which the Creator had endowed man in the beginning. He restores true knowledge as our Prophet and Teacher; He restores holiness as our Priest; and He restores righteousness as our King. Then we see the beauty of the salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ and we see that it is a salvation which is complete and fills all our needs. When salvation is viewed as our Confession views it, we are delivered from the superficial views of many of the fundamentalists and many evangelicals today. He does *not* save only as Priest! More was necessary to restore man than that some One would come and give His life. *Man* had to be restored. God will not be robbed of His works and the Redeemer will restore completely that which fell away.

Although there is difference of opinion in our own circles about the nature of the offices in the church, this writer is of the opinion that the offices in the church must and do correspond to the offices of our Mediator. Question 32 of the Heidelberg Catechism asks concerning the nature of the follower of Christ. Here, in different words, we have the same teaching as that concerning Christ Himself in the previous question. So, the Christ has this triple office of Prophet, Priest, and King. The believer must also show these same qualities. Does it then not follow that the offices in the church, which logically would come between Questions 31 and 32, would also correspond to the offices which Christ has and the believer also? This was the position held quite commonly in some Reformed churches of a generation ago, as the works of K. Dijk demonstrate.

Now we wish to make a few observations regarding the law of God as it relates to the image of God in man.

In truly Reformed circles the importance of the law of God has always been recognized. We are informed by the Heidelberg Catechism that this law is the teacher of sin and that it is also the teacher of true gratitude. In this it is simply restating that which the Scriptures have made very clear. Paul tells us in Romans 3:20: ". . . for through the law cometh the knowledge of sin." In John 14:15 our Lord informs us: "If ye love me, ye will keep my com-

mandments." Because of the importance of the law for the understanding of the whole word of God (for Christ has informed us that on these two commandments, i.e., the first and second tables of the law, are suspended both the law and the prophets), the reading of the law has always had an important place in our worship services. In this we have been distinguished from many of our fundamentalistic brethren who rejoice in a misunderstanding of the word of the Apostle, ". . . for ye are not under law, but under grace." (Rom 6:14) Because of this they sing of the "happy condition" of those who are free from the law. The Word makes it quite clear that man would have no condition left if he were free from the law in their sense of this passage.

One hears more and more of the neglect of the reading of the law even in our own services. Is this an indication that we have not emphasized, or are tending in the direction of not emphasizing sufficiently the element of sin and a view of gratitude which is removed from obedience? If so, there is no longer a full proclamation of the gospel. We then fall into the errors of so many whose fellowship we left more than three hundred years ago.

When we speak of the law in this connection, we mean only the law of the ten commandments. The Belgic Confession (Art. 35) makes it very clear that we are not to hold to the ceremonies of a previous covenant. The ceremonial law as it was found in Israel of the Old Testament has been abrogated, and the same may be said of the civil laws of Israel, though we can learn much from both. Some of the symbolism even carries over into the New Testament.

But when we look upon the moral law in its relation to the image of God in man, we find a paucity of material. Very few theologians have written on this subject directly. There are those who have *approached* this problem, but much more ought to be done in this area.

Hoeksema saw correctly that the law of God is not a mere code; it is the living will of God for the creature.²² I believe that he has seen this problem more clearly than any other Reformed theologian, when he writes,

And according to that will (i.e. the law) He always acts and deals with that creature, blessing it as long as it remains within the boundaries of that law, cursing it the moment it transgresses. And that law or living will of God is in harmony with the very nature of each creature. Thus, there is a law for the fish, that it shall live in the water; for the bird

that it shall fly in the air; for the tree, that it be rooted in the soil. There is a law for the beat of your pulse, for the temperature of your body, for the pressure of your blood. And thus there is also a law for man, who was created a personal, rational, and moral being, consciously and willingly determining his own action. And the law of God for that creature, the law that is entirely in harmony with the nature of that free agent is that he shall love the Lord his God with all his heart and mind and soul and strength and his whole being.²³

This theologian of no mean ability saw the connection between the law of God and the image of God. The law of God, the moral law, is the law for the moral creature, just as the law of gravity and other laws are for the natural creation.

Berkouwer also dealt with this question to a certain extent when he argued that

there is even in the corrupt heart still some consciousness that the violation of what the law commands is opposed to all that which is truly good for man and is against his own humanness.²⁴

Both Berkouwer and Hoeksema make it clear that *conformity* to the law is not the same as *obedience*.

Anything can happen in our alienation from one another, in the state of our alienation from God's command. Outside this command life is not safe, nor are we safe for the other, nor is the other for us.²⁵

These theologians emphasize that there must be a love-relationship of man to his God and to his neighbor to justify saying that he has kept the law.

This love is not found in natural, fallen man. It has turned into its opposite. I am prone by nature to hate God and my neighbor.²⁶ Because this is the state of the present day man, the word of God must be preached accordingly. It is not sufficient to preach only that Jesus saves. The rational man may well ask: *How does He save?* The answer is that He restores man to the kind of being he was originally. The *law* must also be preached, as the only way whereby a man may be able to see his own need. It gives the diagnosis of his condition. This is also the only way that a man will come to know the way he must live before God. He must live in obedience. He is not able to bring that obedience as he is in himself. Therefore, the diagnosis becomes even clearer. Is it any wonder that the Catechism asks at the conclusion of the treatment of the ten

commandments: "Why, then, will God have the ten commandments preached so strictly, since in this life no one can keep them?"²⁷ It must be a real embarrassment to many preachers today to deal with this question and answer when they have not preached these commandments *strictly*.

Most theologians are agreed that man still retains a certain sense of right and wrong even after the fall. He knows instinctively that to kill someone is wrong, that it is wrong to steal, etc. But there is nothing left of his proper relation to his God! In other words, he has no conception whatsoever of what is right and what is wrong in the area of the first table of the law! He does not know the true God and therefore makes all kinds of gods which he worships. He does not know how the true God is to be worshipped. He has no feeling whatsoever for the name or for the day of God. Now, it is only on the basis of the keeping of the first table of the law that there is a possibility of the keeping of the second table. Man must realize that everyone of the commands of God speak to man's nature. He cannot *live* without his God. In the measure in which he violates the commandments of God, in that measure does man lose his humanness! We even use human language in that way: we talk of the in-human characters of men like Nero or Adolf Hitler! The church in its preaching of the Word of God must do justice to these things. This belongs to the "whole counsel of God."

Modern fundamentalism and evangelicalism has not served mankind well with their truncated gospel. The Word of God is far richer than they have proclaimed and modern man needs much more than they offer him.

Let it be made clear to all men that there is salvation from sin only through the blood of Jesus Christ and why this is so. Let it also be made unmistakably clear that man, though he has done great things, has scaled the heights and has plumbed the depths, is in bitter need of redemption! I pray that this essay may stimulate others to further pursuit of the truths contained in these areas.

*This article is an arrangement of the academic convocation address given on August 30, 1985, at the beginning of the 1985-86 academic year of Mid-America Reformed Seminary.

NOTES

¹William Jennings Bryan, in his commencement address entitled *Man*.

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²John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.15.3 (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Education, 1936).

³Louis Berkhof, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1941), 202.

⁴Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, Vol. 2 (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1928), 493.

⁵Klaas Schilder, *Heidelberg Catechismus*, Vol. 1 (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1939), 300.

⁶Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1966), 206.

⁷Hoeksema, *Dogmatics*, 206; he refers here to the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 12; the Belgic Confession, Article 12; and the Canons of Dort, III/IV.

⁸J.C. Sikkel, *Het Boek der Geboorten*, 1st ed. (Amsterdam: J.W.A. van Schaik, 1906), 96.

⁹Schilder, *Catechismus*, 255, 273, 284, 306.

¹⁰Hoeksema, *Dogmatics*, 213.

¹¹Hoeksema, *Dogmatics*, 211.

¹²Schilder, *Catechismus*, 75ff, 116-120, 278, 284, 295, 109-110.

¹³G.C. Berkouwer, *Man: the Image of God*, trans. by Dirk W. Jellema (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1962), 158; here Berkouwer cites Hoeksema and provides an evaluation of his thought.

¹⁴Berkouwer, *Man*, 38.

¹⁵Berkouwer, *Man*, 162.

¹⁶Bavinck, *Dogmatiek*, Vol. 2, 491ff.

¹⁷Bavinck, *Dogmatiek*, Vol. 2, 547-548.

¹⁸Berkouwer, *Man*, 122.

¹⁹Calvin, *Institutes*, I.15.4.

²⁰Abraham Kuyper, Jr., *Christelijke Encyclopaedie*, 1st ed., Vol. 1 (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1925), 255-256.

²¹Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 12, Q. 31.

²²Hoeksema, *Dogmatics*, 214.

²³Hoeksema, *Dogmatics*, 224.

²⁴Berkouwer, *Man*, 175.

²⁵Berkouwer, *Man*, 184-185.

²⁶Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 3, Q. 5.

²⁷Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 44, Q. 115.