

that these things are sacraments. Moreover, they are not even historically catholic since it took many centuries of apostasy for Rome to declare some of these rites sacraments.

Let us now turn to four errors or perversions involving the doctrine of catholicity. First, regarding soteriology, the doctrine of salvation, many teach a universal love and desire of God to save absolutely everybody, including the Antichrist and all his predecessors (I John 2:18), rather than the truth of God's effectual love and desire for the salvation of His elect and catholic church alone. Others go further by teaching a universal atonement, claiming that Jesus shed His blood for everyone head for head, the goats as well as the "sheep" (John 10:15, 26), and the reprobate "world" for whom He did not pray as well as those His Father gave Him (17:9). Some argue from a universal divine love and a universal atonement to sheer universalism: every man, woman and child will finally be saved as members of the triumphant catholic church (contra Matt. 25:31-46)!

The second error concerns eschatology, the doctrine of the last things. Postmillennialism foolishly dreams of a future golden age with almost everyone on earth being a true Christian prior to the Lord's bodily return. Here catholicity is twisted to further the notion that the church is to become the vast numerical majority toward the end of this age (contra Matt. 7:13-14; II Thess. 2; II Tim. 3; Rev. 13:6-8).

Third, we come to ecclesiology. Catholicity in the hands of modernist Protestants and Roman Catholics becomes sheer inclusivism. False ecumenism accepts all or almost all churches and even the cults as if they were truly Christian, irrespective of the heterodoxy of their creeds, theology, preaching, office-bearers and membership.

This wicked disregard for God's truth leads to syncretism. Those who belong to the so-called "Abrahamic religions" (Judaism and Islam) are also the people of God, as are those who belong to the other pagan religions (Hinduism, Shintoism, etc.). In fact, the ancient philosophers (like Socrates and Plato), atheists, evolutionists, humanists and agnostics are all God's children in His image, as if Jesus Christ were not the only "name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12)!

Fourth, this perversion of catholicity is even used to promote the idea that there are contradictory and competing theologies in the Bible. Many claim that the Old Testament teaches a different religion from the New Testament (contra John 5:39), that Peter disagrees with Paul (contra II Pet. 3:16), that Paul deviates from Christ (contra Gal. 1:11-12) and that Paul even contradicts himself (contra II Tim. 4:7)!

Thus catholicity is abused so as to create disagreements and conflicts within Scripture, and to cover up massive and irreconcilable contradictions in doctrine, and between churches and religions. This is a false catholicity with no true unity for the many has eaten up the one!

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Catholicity Reflected in Sacraments and Corrupted by Errors

The sacraments of the New Testament church reflect its possession of a greater catholicity than the Old Testament church. Baptism is administered to people speaking different languages all around the world in many countries. One does not have to join the nation of Israel or move to the land of Canaan to become a member of Christ's kingdom. Females are baptized, whereas in the Old Testament they were not circumcised, with circumcision being the older equivalent of baptism (Col. 2:11-13).

The New Testament initiatory sacrament is not less catholic regarding the seed of believers than Old Testament circumcision. The children of at least one godly parent are recipients of the Holy Spirit (Isa. 59:20-21) and holy (I Cor. 7:14), for they are included in Christ's church (Eph. 1:1-2; 6:1-4), embraced in God's covenant promise (Gen. 17:7; Acts 2:39) and enrolled in the kingdom of heaven (Mark 10:13-16), though there are reprobate Esaus among our offspring, as well as elect Jacobs (Rom. 9:13).

Those promised spiritual baptism and salvation as members of Christ's catholic church ought to receive its physical sign (Acts 10:47). "For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many" (I Cor. 12:12-14).

The element of the sacrament of baptism also reflects the church's catholicity. Water is relatively accessible all around the globe, even in a wilderness (Acts 8:26, 36), and not much is needed for sprinkling or pouring.

The Lord's Supper also reflects the greater catholicity of the New Testament church. As with baptism, the second Christian sacrament is administered to females. From this perspective too, it is greater than the Passover, its Old Testament equivalent (I Cor. 5:7), for women were not required to go up to the temple for the pilgrimage feasts.

The Passover involved the sacrificing of lambs by Levitical priests upon the altar in Jerusalem. In comparison, the two elements of the Lord's Supper, bread and wine, are much easier to administer in local churches around the world.

The Passover and the Lord's Supper are alike in that neither is to be administered to children, for I Corinthians 11 requires that those who partake of the sacrament are able to examine themselves and discern how the Lord's body is (spiritually) present (27-32).

The church's catholicity also provides us with a useful perspective from which to critique and reject the alleged five additional sacraments of Rome (confirmation, penance, matrimony, holy orders and extreme unction). Fatally, Scripture does not teach

God's Restraint of Sin

The lengthy question for this issue of the *News* arises from a number of passages that speak of God's restraining sin. "(1) In Exodus 34:23, God commanded the men of Israel to leave their plot of land to go and appear before Him three times a year. To ensure the protection of God's people from invasion during these times, even though the pagan nations surrounding them desired their land year-round, He promised that 'neither shall any man desire thy land, when thou shalt go up to appear before the LORD thy God thrice in the year' (24). How is God's protection of the land of Israel from being invaded by the pagan nations on their border by His restraining their wicked hearts explained apart from a gracious influence of the Spirit upon them?

(2) God restrained David from taking revenge on Nabal for scorning the messengers that David sent to greet Nabal (I Sam. 25:14). Abigail, Nabal's wife, recognized God's grace when she pleaded with David not to seek vengeance against her husband, 'seeing the LORD hath withholden thee from coming to shed blood, and from avenging thyself with thine own hand' (26). David acknowledged this truth: 'as the LORD God of Israel liveth, which hath kept me back from hurting thee ...' (34).

(3) In Genesis 20, God restrained Abimelech from touching Sarah, Abraham's wife: 'I also withheld thee from sinning against me: therefore suffered I thee not to touch her' (6).

(4) In God's punishment of Israel for its rebellion, we read that He 'gave them up unto their own hearts' lust' with the effect that 'they walked in their own counsels' (Ps. 81:12). (5) Similarly, in Romans 1, where Paul describes those who suppress the truth by their wickedness, God 'gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient' (28). Does not this 'giving someone over' imply that there was previously a gracious restraint or influence of the Spirit upon them that was removed?"

(2) David and (3) Abimelech were both godly men, and there can be no question that God's restraint of sin in both cases was gracious. He kept David from vengeful murder and Abimelech, King of Gerar, from unwitting adultery. That Abimelech was a godly man is clear from his knowledge of God, his confession that he and his nation were righteous, his understanding that adultery was sin and God's Word concerning him: "Yea, I know that thou didst this in the integrity of thy heart; for I also withheld thee from sinning against me: therefore suffered I thee not to touch her" (Gen. 20:6), David was, as we know, a man after God's own heart and a picture of Christ. That God restrains His people from sin is one of the great blessings of grace, for we are so foolish that we would go headlong into sin, were it not for His restraining hand and Spirit.

The other examples have to do with God's restraint of sin in those who are unsaved. (1) He restrained the wickedness of the nations that surrounded Israel in order to protect His people and the promise of Christ. Our *Belgic Confession* says, "He so restrains the devil and all our enemies, that without his will and permission, they cannot hurt us" (13). (4) In giving up the men of Israel to their own hearts' lust and (5) in giving up the ungodly to a reprobate mind, He most certainly did remove a previous restraint. We see

such things happening in our societies. God, in His just judgment, removes the restraints that once kept homosexuality, murder of infants and other gross sins in check, as Romans 1 teaches. He does it because they hold the truth of God under in unrighteousness and do not like to retain God in their knowledge. So He takes even the knowledge that they are destroying themselves away from them. He does so that they may reach a certain measure of wickedness and become ready for judgment (cf. Gen. 15:16).

God does this by His Holy Spirit, just as He does all things by the Spirit, first restraining their sin and then removing His restraints through the sovereign operations of the Spirit. He does this for the sake of His beloved church and to bring to pass all that He has decreed, but this restraint is not grace to the reprobate. Its purpose in the salvation of His redeemed people is gracious but there is no grace of God in the restraint itself, no grace shown to those whose wickedness He restrains. His restraint is like putting a muzzle on a rabid dog. The dog is restrained from biting and others are protected from it, but its nature is not changed nor its disease cured. God even restrains Satan (Job 1:12; 2:6; Rev. 20:1-3) and that most certainly is not a gracious restraint. Indeed, it is proof that God is able to restrain wickedness by His almighty power without showing grace to those whose sin is restrained.

God uses many different means to restrain man's wickedness: the fear of punishment; the desire for the praise of others; the social shame and disgrace that wickedness brings at times, even among the ungodly; the fear of revenge; the evil consequences of sin to one's health, family or career. Even then, these restraints only just keep sin in check. When they are removed, it becomes evident that man's heart was not changed by these restraints, for he is still just as depraved and prone to all evil as before.

God, in His justice, uses these wicked men themselves to remove those restraints. He uses their courts to legalize homosexuality, abortion and drug abuse. He puts the medical, financial and legal means in their hands to descend into lawlessness and gross wickedness. He gives them the knowledge to invent and create, and then turn it all to the service of sin and Satan. What a testimony to His justice and righteousness that is!

Our denial of common grace, therefore, is not a denial of God's restraint of sin, nor of the fact that this restraint is the work of His Spirit, nor of His gracious purpose in restraining sin. It is simply that there is no grace except in the cross and shed blood of our Saviour, and no grace for those who are without Christ. Proverbs 3:33 reminds us that "the curse of the LORD is in the house of the wicked," not His grace. It would be strange grace, anyway, that first restrained their wickedness and then withdrew.

To return to God's gracious restraint of sin in His people, as in the case of David and Abimelech, we should remember that He also, in His justice, sometimes removes those restraints so that we fall into sin. This happens when we are hard-hearted and stubborn, and when we neglect prayer and watching. We must, therefore, be warned and be constant, lest we fall into temptation and into the snares of Satan. This matter of the restraint of sin should teach us, therefore, to look to Him always in the great battle we fight against Satan's wiles and our own sinfulness.

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