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Guilt, Grace and Gratitude

The Heidelberg Catechism in Twentieth-Century Dutch Theology*

Introduction

The *Heidelberg Catechism* 1563 (*HC*) has always occupied a special position in Reformed Protestantism in the Netherlands. In my opinion, the main reason for this is that in the *HC*, Christian comfort has a central place. Its very first question asks *what* should be understood by this comfort, and the answer is, in short: to belong to Jesus Christ. Next, the question is raised in what way one shares in this comfort? The answer to this question is that one may live comforted if one knows three things. First, the greatness of your sins and wretchedness. Secondly, how you are freed from all your sins and their wretched consequences. Thirdly, what gratitude you owe God for this redemption. Here we see what I will call the ‘threesome’ of guilt, grace and gratitude.¹

A. Five models

In this article I would like to share the results of my research into the way in which this set of three has functioned as a theological paradigm in the Netherlands in the twentieth century. To this end I have examined about eighty commentaries on the *HC*, which were published in the twentieth century in the Netherlands. I found that these commentaries reflected five distinct models of explanation for this threesome. These are:

1. The experiential-chronological model
2. The so-called “doctrine of the supposed rebirth” model
3. The model according to the first conception of the covenant
4. The model according to the second conception of the covenant
5. The model according to the christocentric conception.

In this lecture I will discuss these five models and afterwards present an evaluation.

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¹ For the text of the *Heidelberg Catechism* I used: Bakhuizen van den Brink, J. N. (ed.), *De Nederlandse Belijdenisgeschriften*, 2nd edition, Amsterdam: Ton Bolland, 1976.

1. The experiential-chronological model

According to this view,

a) the threesome of guilt, grace and gratitude must be known in an experiential way, that is to say, as an inner experience, in order for the believer to be comforted, and

b) this experience is *chronological*. This means that first one has to experience the depth of one's sins and wretchedness. After that, the knowledge of the redemption through Jesus Christ can follow; after that, one can become grateful for this redemption. Theologically speaking: the knowledge of a precedent forms the condition for the knowledge of what follows.

An example of this model is the commentary by G. H. Kersten (1882–1948), a Dutch minister. He says: In order to receive the unmistakable comfort, an experiential knowledge of guilt, grace and gratitude is necessary. In the temporal order of things knowledge of our sin comes first. This knowledge leads us to an inner remorse. Only in this way one comes to know Jesus Christ, and attains the second part of the threesome: the knowledge of redemption. After that, in third instance, gratitude is possible.²

In this model, various factors play a role. Firstly, there is the view on the relation between the Law and the Gospel. In line with Lutheran opinion, remorse for past sins, which one sees in the light of God's Law, precedes comfort by the Gospel.³ Secondly there is the view on what is called the 'order of salvation'. This term denotes the specific path that one follows in order to share the comfort of God. This 'order of salvation' involves the threesome of guilt, grace and gratitude. This puts additional emphasis on the conditional character of the knowledge of a preceding step in relation to the following.⁴

A psychological factor also plays a part in this model. Experience teaches us that nobody needs a redeemer if they do not *feel* wretched, in the same way as patients do not need a doctor if they do not see that they are ill.⁵

One of the things that strike me in Kersten's explanation is the fact that it focuses so much on the experience of wretchedness. This knowledge is the

² Kersten, G. H., *De Heidelbergsche Catechismus in 52 predikaties*, 2 volumes, Utrecht: De Banier, 1948–1949. See I, 22–23.

³ Cf. Luther, M., *Commentary on Galatians 4:4*: „Uns aber hat das Gesetz angeklagt und geschreckt, es hat uns der Sünde, dem Tod und Zorn Gottes unterworfen und mit seinem Urteilspruch verdammt“, W. A. I/II, 216. Also Peters, A., *Gesetz und Evangelium*, Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn 1981.

⁴ Genderen, J. van – W. H. Velema, *Beknopte Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, Kampen: Kok, 1992, 522 et seq. In this line: the catechetical book of Hellenbroek A., *Voorbeeld der Goddelijke Waarheden voor eenvoudigen, die zich bereiden tot de belijdenis des geloofs*, Rotterdam, 1706.

⁵ Cf. M. Luther: „Gleich als eynem krancken ist zum ersten nott das er wisse, was seyn kranckheyt ist, was er mag oder nit mag thun oder lassen. Darnach ist nott, das er wisse, wo die ertzney sey, die yhm helffe“, in *Eyn kurz form der zeehen gepott, eyn kurz form des glaubens, eyn kurz form des Vatter unsers* (1520), W. A., VII, 204–205.

condition for belief in Christ.⁶ This means that the knowledge of wretchedness itself is not a part of the belief in Christ, but must be known before the belief in Christ. This opinion has not remained uncontradicted in the Netherlands. A theologian such as J. G. Woelderink disputes Kersten's idea that knowledge of sin precedes knowledge of Christ. In his opinion knowledge of sin is not a preparation for knowledge of redemption, but inseparable from it. To put it more strongly: knowledge of wretchedness without knowledge of the Redeemer is no real knowledge of wretchedness.⁷

C. Graafland, too, rejects a view of knowledge of wretchedness as separate from the knowledge of the Gospel. He does this for pastoral reasons. In his opinion this form of knowledge can lead to psychological depression.⁸

Thus far the first model.

By the way, I should point out that in the Netherlands this model exists in all kinds of gradations. For instance, one may appreciate the experiential and even for the experiential-chronological nature of the knowledge of the threesome, but reject the conditionality of it. This sometimes – not always – points to a relationship with the Kohlbruggian trend represented in the fourth model. I will return to this point later.

2. The so-called “supposed rebirth” model

I now come to the second model, which follows the view of the threesome based on the doctrine of the “supposed rebirth”.

This model is rooted in the theology of Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), the father of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. Kuyper developed the doctrine of the supposed rebirth in connection with his view on baptism. He was a supporter of infant baptism. In his opinion, infant baptism was a symbol of and a seal on the rebirth of the child. This conception of baptism involves the notion that the little child to be baptised is already reborn. A new-born in the Christian community by rebirth becomes a seed of new life. This means that the child already has the so-called *habitus fidei*: the capacity to believe.⁹

From this point of view we will consider Kuyper's view of the threesome guilt, grace and gratitude. In his commentary on the *HC, E Voto Dordraceno* (s.a.), he says: when a baptised, reborn child grows up, he or she will be

⁶ Kersten, G. H., *Ibidem*, 42.

⁷ Cf. Woelderink, J. G., *De inzet van de Catechismus. Verklaring van de zondagen 1 – VII van de Heidelberger*, Franeker s.a., 22.

⁸ Graafland, C., *Gereformeerden op zoek naar God*, Kampen: De Groot Goudriaan, 1990, 143–144. Also: Graafland, C., in *Theologia Reformata*, XXIII, no. 1, March 1980, 13 et seq., 23–25.

⁹ Kuyper, A., *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 3, Kampen s.a., 394–450; See Velema, W. H., *De leer van de Heilige Geest bij Abraham Kuyper*, 's-Gravenhage 1957, 144 et seq.

converted by the preaching of the Word of God. At that moment the capability to believe turns into actual believing: the *actus fidei*.¹⁰

To believe is to become aware of a knowledge of which the reborn unknowingly already possessed the seeds. Applied to the threesome this means that the reborn faithful at a given moment becomes aware of the fact that he is a sinner, that he is redeemed by Jesus Christ and that he is called to gratitude. The *habitus* of this threefold knowledge turns into to the *actus* of this knowledge.¹¹

Characteristic for the knowledge of guilt, grace and gratitude in Kuyper's rebirth concept is that it forms one organic whole.¹² Kuyper does not hint at any chronological view of the threesome, and of course this would not be relevant, because the reborn has possessed already the seeds of the knowledge of guilt, grace and gratitude since rebirth.

Also, we see that in Kuyper's concept knowledge is rather rational. This curbs the experiential element.¹³

The Kuyperian view on the threesome was not shared by everybody in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. In the opinion of a growing number of church members, Kuyper's ideas led to superficiality in belief. A counter-movement came up, which had already been present as an undercurrent.¹⁴ Theologians of this movement pleaded for the necessity of *self-examination*. That is to say: everybody who had been baptised because they were supposed to be reborn, had to ask themselves in the light of specific marks if rebirth had actually taken place.¹⁵ The synod of the Reformed Churches of 1905 accepted this criticism and declared that the doctrine of supposed rebirth should be complemented by the element of self-examination.¹⁶

This introduction of the self-examination allowed more room to the experiential aspect of the knowledge of the threesome.

This is illustrated by the ideas of A. G. Honig (1864–1940).¹⁷ Much more than Kuyper he recognised that the knowledge of wretchedness has an experiential side. This knowledge is necessary in order to obtain knowledge of redemption.

In this conception, knowledge of the third element of the threesome, gratitude, acquires a new function, in connection with the self-examination.

¹⁰ Kuyper, A., *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 421.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, I, 17.

¹² *Ibidem*, IV, 298.

¹³ *Ibidem*, I, 17 and III, 440.

¹⁴ So L. Lindeboom (1845–1933). See about him: Smilde, E. S. *Een eeuw van strijd over verbond en doop*, Kampen: Kok, 1946, 223 et seq. And H. Bavinck, *Roeping en wedergeboorte*, Kampen 1903.

¹⁵ Veenhof, J., "Discussie over het zelfonderzoek – sleutel tot verstaan van het schisma van 1944" in *Theologia Reformata*, XLIV, no. 3, September 2002, 219–241.

¹⁶ Impeta, C. N., *Zelfonderzoek noodzakelijk*, Kampen: Kok 1936, 225.

¹⁷ Honig, A. G., *Handboek van de gereformeerde dogmatiek*, Kampen: Kok, 1938.

The fruits of gratitude now become an important criterion to determine whether one really has been reborn.¹⁸

For some decades this bipolar model of supposed rebirth on the one hand and self-examination on the other hand remained influential. Then a new critical view on the chosen positions came up, calling for more attention to the aspect of the *covenant*.¹⁹ Kuyper was certainly aware of the idea of the covenant, but in his theology this concept could not be developed because it was overruled by the theology of rebirth and election.

3. The model according to the first conception of the covenant

This brings me to the third model, explicitly based on the idea of the covenant. Because the next model, the fourth, also thinks in these terms, I will simply distinguish the two by speaking of the first conception of the covenant now, and later of the second.

As I said just now, in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands this covenant model replaced the former model of Kuyper's. An important exponent of the new model was K. Schilder (1890–1952). In his theology the notion of the covenant plays a dominant role, as it does in his view on the threesome in the *HC*.²⁰

In this change I note a transition from a more subjective to a more objective way of thinking, of which Schilder's salvation-historical theology is an exponent.²¹

I will now look at the ideas of B. Holwerda (1909–1952), another representative of the third model, on the threesome of guilt, grace and gratitude. In Holwerda's commentary on the *HC* his view on this threesome is indeed found to rest on the notion of the covenant. In relation to this covenant Holwerda thinks of two things: firstly, God's promise of salvation, and secondly, the response of the faithful to God's promise. If the faithful do not respond the covenant is not complete.²²

¹⁸ Cf. Bavinck, J., *De Heidelbergse Catechismus. In 60 leerredenen verklaard*, Kampen: Kok 1903–1914, II, 582 et seq. Hoekstra, H., *De Heidelbergse Catechismus in twee en vijftig leerredenen*, Amsterdam: Wormser, 1893, 483 et seq. Feringa, J. H., *God is liefde. De Heidelbergse Catechismus behandeld in twee en vijftig deelen*, Amsterdam – Pretoria 1904, 576.

¹⁹ Graaf, S. G. De, *Verbondsgeschiedenis*, 2 volumes, Kampen: Kok 1952. Idem, *Het ware geloof, beschouwingen over zondag 1 – 22 van de Heidelbergse Catechismus*, Kampen: Kok, 1954.

²⁰ Schilder, K., *Heidelbergse Catechismus*, 4 volumes, Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre 1947–1951.

²¹ Cf. Dijk, D. van, *Verbond en belijdenis*, Kampen: Kok, 1962, 2.

²² Holwerda, B., *De dingen die ons van God geschonken zijn, Catechismuspredikatiën*, 4 volumes, Goes 1953–1955. Cf. especially I, 19.

I will now explore the consequences of Holwerda's notion of the covenant for the knowledge of the threesome of guilt, grace and gratitude. According to Holwerda, knowledge of all three parts is a qualified knowledge, resulting from the faith that originated in response to the covenant.²³ That is to say: in the knowledge of the threesome, the belief in Christ as Redeemer has a central place. From this point of view Holwerda emphasises the unity of the knowledge of the three parts. He sharply rejects the idea that knowledge of wretchedness precedes knowledge of redemption.²⁴

It should also be noted that the knowledge of both wretchedness and redemption is rather rational. In this, Holwerda's ideas are similar to Kuyper's. For him, to believe is to accept God's promise of salvation. To doubt God's promise is the result of pietistic aberrations and leads to uncertainty.²⁵

As regards gratitude: this element receives much attention. The point is that this represents new life in the covenant. All who accept God's promise of salvation become grateful human beings. It is exactly in this gratitude that the bilateral character of the covenant becomes visible.²⁶

Whether the fruits of gratitude could be a criterion to decide if one is a true believer is not an issue in this model. The question is quite beside the point. The idea of self-examination is rejected; instead, in this third model the term "self-testing" is used. The point is not whether one is a true believer, but whether one *lives* as a true believer.²⁷ This explains why the commentaries related to this third model always contain extensive discussions of the Ten Commandments.

4. The model according to the second conception of the covenant

I will now discuss the fourth model, the second model viewing the threesome from the idea of the covenant. We now leave the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands and enter the theological territory of the Dutch Reformed Church. Here, the movement viewing the threesome from the perspective of the covenant is that arising from the theological ideas of Ph. J. Hoedemaker (1839–1910)²⁸ and secondly, at later stage, those of H. F.

²³ Holwerda, B., *De dingen die ons van God geschonken zijn*, I, 106 et seq.

²⁴ Dijk, D. Van, 'De drie stukken' in *De Reformatie*, XVI, no. 27, 228; Also Dijk, D. van in Dijk, D. van – Jongeling, B. (red.), *Wederkeer. Catechismuspreken*, Groningen s.a., 1–16.

²⁵ Holwerda, B., *De dingen*, I, 108; III, 11 et seq.

²⁶ Holwerda propagates the idea of the antithesis; cf. *Ibidem*, I, 11.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, III, 54 et seq.

²⁸ Noordijk, G. D. *Een onbegrepen denker. Gedachten over Dr. Ph. J. Hoedemaker uit zijn werken bijeenverzameld en systematisch gerangschikt*, Wageningen: H. Veenman & Zonen 1927; Schokking J. a.o., *Dr. Ph. J. Hoedemaker 1868–1908, Gedenkboek ter gelegenheid van zijn 40-jarige ambtsbediening*, Leiden: A. L. de Vlieger 1908; Scheers, G. Ph., *Philippus*

Kohlbrugge (1803–1875).²⁹ How do the representants of this fourth model see the knowledge of the threesome of guilt, grace and gratitude? We can firstly say that for them, this knowledge functions within the area of the Christian community as the space where God's promises are valid.³⁰ In the covenant Jesus Christ has a central place. That is to say: all knowledge of wretchedness, redemption, and gratitude is connected with knowledge of Christ.³¹ This fourth model especially emphasises the thought that nobody can really know their wretchedness without the relation with Christ.³² Knowledge of gratitude, too, is seen as closely linked with knowledge of Christ; a crucial difference with the previous, third model.³³

What next strikes me is the fact that among the main representatives of this model the theological dimension of knowledge occupies a central place. Little attention is given to the experiential side of knowledge.³⁴

It is exactly this point that requires elaboration. This is interesting: in the same way as the Kuyperian model was extended with the aspect of experience, so this model is expanded, too. It is here that the line inspired by the theology of Kohlbrugge comes in. This view also stresses the experiential dimension of the threesome, thus fine-tuning this second covenant model. On the one hand Kohlbrugge agrees fully with Hoedemaker when he says that there is no separate place for knowledge of wretchedness learned from the Law. Wretchedness is to be learned at the feet of Christ, in the light of the Cross.³⁵ On the other hand Kohlbrugge leaves room for the *experience* of the threesome, and even a chronological experience: first of wretchedness, then

Jacobus Hoedemaker, Wageningen: Veenman 1939 (reprint Leiden 1989); Abma, G. – Bruijn, J. de (red.), *Hoedemaker herdacht*, Baarn: Ten Have, 1989.

²⁹ Groot, H. J. De, *Onder de bekoring van Kohlbrugge en zijn vrienden*, Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1940; Loos, J., *De theologie van Kohlbrugge*, Amsterdam: Uitgeversmaatschappij Holland, 1948; Barth, K., *Die Protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert*, 2., verbesserte Auflage, Zollikon – Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1952, 579–598; Hoek, W. A., *H. F. Kohlbrugge, De onheilige heilige*, Amsterdam: Ten Have, 1964; Reuver, A. de, “Bedelen bij de bron”, *Kohlbrugge's geloofsopvatting vergeleken met de Reformatie en Nadere Reformatie*, Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1992.

³⁰ Haitjema, Th. L., *De Heidelbergse Catechismus als klankbodem en inhoud van het actuele belijden onzer kerk*, Wageningen: H. Veenman & Zonen, 1962, 16.

³¹ Haitjema, Th. L., *Ibidem*, 19.

³² Oorthuys, G., *De eeuwige jeugd van Heidelberg. De Heidelbergsche Catechismus een leerboek voor onzen tijd*, Tweede herziene druk, Amsterdam: Uitgeversmaatschappij Holland, 1948, 13–14.

³³ *Ibidem*, 22.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, 25 et seq.

³⁵ Kohlbrugge, H. F., *De eenvoudige Heidelbergse Catechismuspreken*, Tweede druk, Franeker: T. Wever s.a., 92. Cf. Reuver, A. de, *Ibidem*, 191.

of redemption, and then of gratitude.³⁶ However (and this is different from Kersten in the first model), for Kohlbrugge this order is never conditional.³⁷

The view on gratitude in this fourth model is remarkable. Believers do become new creatures, but only in Christ. Gratitude is spoken of in christological terms. The idea that the believers themselves should be capable of bringing forth the fruits of belief is rejected.³⁸

5. The model according to the christocentric conception

We have now come to the fifth model, the christocentric view.

This is the model inspired by the theology of K. Barth (1886–1968) and his thinking “from the middle position”. Barth recognises the importance of the classic threesome as given in the *HC*, but his perspective is new: his approach is in principle christocentric.³⁹ According to Barth, Sunday 1 of the *HC* is the confession of a person redeemed by Christ. This is not only because we here have the confession of the believer, but also because – from the perspective of the revelation – it is not *legitimate* to speak of any human being other than a redeemed human being.⁴⁰ The history of mankind is qualified by the Cross and the Resurrection of Christ. The reconciliation through Christ is the radiant centre of the history. At Golgotha, judgement has been passed over all people. Man separated from Christ has no independent significance.⁴¹

Well then, in this theological frame the old threesome: knowledge of guilt, grace and gratitude, can be seen in a new light. It will not surprise us to hear Barth say that the knowledge of redemption in principle precedes the other two.⁴² At this moment, we are living under the Gospel. This is why he says:

“Wird nie den Mensch an sich gesehen, sondern immer als das Eigentum seines getreuen Heilandes.”⁴³

³⁶ Kohlbrugge, H. F., *Ibidem*, 74 et seq.

³⁷ Reuver, A. de – Kooten, R. van (red.), *Naar zijn reine leer, 64 preken over de 52 zondagen van de Heidelbergse Catechismus*, Utrecht: Den Hertog 1981, 114–115.

³⁸ Kohlbrugge, H. F., *Vragen en antwoorden tot opheldering en bevestiging van den Heidelbergischen Catechismus*, Amsterdam: Vereeniging tot uitgave van Gereformeerde geschriften 1930, 160. Cf. Oorthuys, G., *Ibidem*, 178 et seq; Haitjema, Th. L., *Ibidem*, 216; Hoek, W. A., *Ibidem*, 46 et seq.; Reuver, A. de, ‘*Bedelen bij de bron*’. 235 et seq.

³⁹ Cf. Haitjema, Th. L., “De dogmatische betekenis van den Heidelbergse Catechismus voor het actuele belijden onzer Kerk” in *Kerk en Theologie* XI, no. 1, January 1963, 24.

⁴⁰ Barth, K., *Die christliche Lehre nach dem Heidelberger Katechismus*, Zollikon – Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1948, 30.

⁴¹ Barth, K., *K. D.*, IV. I., 612. Cf. also Berkouwer, C. G., *De triomf der genade in de theologie van Karl Barth*, Kampen: Kok, 1954, 130.

⁴² Barth, K., *Die christliche Lehre*, § 5: „Aber schon das ist Trost, dass eben Jesus Christus es ist, der ihm dieses Urteil spricht.“

⁴³ *Ibidem*, 30.

Only from the knowledge of redemption can we attain knowledge of wretchedness.

From a theological point of view the relation between Law and Gospel plays an important part in this fifth model, just as it did in the first. However – as we know –, Barth reverses the order: he first speaks of the Gospel, then of the Law. In other words: the Law is the form the Gospel takes. Knowledge of wretchedness is derived from the Law, but it does not precede the Gospel; instead, it is included in the Gospel.⁴⁴

That this knowledge is not necessary at cross-purposes with the experiential dimension is shown by K. H. Miskotte (1894–1976). He emphasises that the knowledge of guilt, grace and gratitude is also derived from experience.⁴⁵ However, he is at pains to stress the difference between his view and the piety of the conventicles, where experiential knowledge of wretchedness is a necessary condition for redemption.⁴⁶ As to the knowledge of gratitude: this arises from the deliverance by Christ and should not be considered an independent theme. It rests exclusively upon God's grace.⁴⁷

B. Evaluation

I will now again go over the field I have just outlined, and comment on my findings.

1. Characteristics of the five models

In the first place I hope to have made clear what is characteristic of each of the five models. In the first model, that of the experiential-chronological conception, the focus is on the knowledge of wretchedness. This is the model which sets out to retain the inheritance of the so called Further Reformation, the Reformed Pietism in the Netherlands.

The second model, following the doctrine of the supposed rebirth, did not initially place much emphasis on the knowledge of wretchedness, but all the more on knowledge of redemption and gratitude. In reaction to this, exponents of the school of the so-called self-examination pointed to the importance of the knowledge of wretchedness.

⁴⁴ In this line also Koopmans, J., *De tien geboden. Toelichting op de Heidelbergse Catechismus, zondag XXXIV – XLIV*, Tweede druk, Franeker, s.a., 12.

⁴⁵ Miskotte, K. H., *De blijde wetenschap, Toelichting op de Heidelbergse catechismus zondag I–XII*, Tweede, ongewijzigde druk, Franeker: T. Wever, s.a., 22 et seq.

⁴⁶ Miskotte, K. H., *Korte nabetrachting over de Afscheiding van 1834*, Amsterdam: Uitgeversmaatschappij Holland, 1934; reprint in *Om u de Waarheid te zeggen*, Kampen: Kok 1971.

⁴⁷ Barth, K., *K. D.*, I/2, Zürich 1938, 875 – 890. Cf. Kruijff, G. G. de *Christelijke ethiek. Een inleiding met sleutelteksten*, Zoetermeer: Meinema, 1999, 32 et seq.

In the third model, based on the first conception of the covenant, the knowledge of redemption is stressed. While the knowledge of wretchedness remains in the background, the emphasis on gratitude scores high. This model is the least experiential of the five.

In the fourth model, starting from the second conception of the covenant, the knowledge of redemption also occupies a central place. Knowledge of wretchedness is derived from this, although Kohlbrugge's followers grant it more place. The knowledge of gratitude is not a separate theme. Both these covenant-models see themselves – together with model 2 – as the legitimate continuation of the Calvinist branch of the Reformation of the sixteenth century.

Model five, the christocentric model, in some respects follows model four. Here, however, the priority of the redemption is radicalised into a preliminary theological condition.

2. Polemics

Secondly, I will now discuss the relations between the five models. What do exponents of one model think about the others? I have found a remarkable amount of polemics between the defenders of the various models.

G. H. Kersten, an exponent of the experiential-chronological model (model 1), criticises the other models. He considers them superficial and deceptive as far as the well-being of humankind is concerned.⁴⁸

Conversely, model 1 is always the object of criticism from adherents of the other models. They sharply reject the conditional character of the experiential-chronological view.

3. Approaches and retreats

Yet, we cannot say that all the five camps do is fight each other. The picture is not quite so black-and-white. When we compare the models to rail tracks, we see that sometimes they do run together. Let me give some examples.

Both model 3 and 4 are based on the concept of the covenant. Because of this they follow the same track for a while, for instance when they say that the knowledge of the threesome should be placed within the framework of God's promise of salvation.

Something similar may be said of models 1, 2 and 4 in connection with experience. When Kersten emphasizes that there is no knowledge of redemption without a preceding knowledge of wretchedness, this meshes with Honig's plea for self-examination in model 2, and with the space given to self-knowledge in the Kohlbruggian way of thinking in model 4.

⁴⁸ Kersten, G. H., *Ibidem*, I, 22, 120.

But let us make no mistake in this. At decisive moments the points are reversed and the models again follow separate tracks. Both model 3 and 4 hold that the covenant is the starting point for the knowledge of the threesome, but when we then ask *how* their adherents see the covenant they are found to have different opinions, as we saw. And on the point of the knowledge of gratitude these two models are diametrically opposed.

The same may be said of the experiential aspect, on which models 1, 2 and 4 follow the same route. However, there comes a point when model 1 says: before sharing in the redemption, one must first be afraid, through the experience of wretchedness. At this, model 2 gets a little irritated and says: 'that goes too far'; model 4 says model 1 is on the wrong track, for in this way knowledge of wretchedness is no longer knowledge of belief. Model 5 hastens to agree.

4. My own position

At the end of this historical survey of the perspectives on the Heidelberg threesome in the twentieth century in the Netherlands, I will conclude with my own view on the question of how to interpret the triplets of guilt, grace and gratitude.

I think the best approach is to consult the Palatine church order of 1563. This church order was introduced in the year of the publication of the *HC*.⁴⁹ It is beautifully set up: first, the baptismal formula is given, then the *HC* follows, and then the Communion formula. It is remarkable that these three parts of the church order follow the order of the threesome: guilt, grace and gratitude.

Therefore I conclude: baptism teaches us three things: the child who is baptised is wretched, is redeemed and is called to gratitude. Holy Communion teaches us the same three things: the person who takes communion is wretched, is redeemed and is called to gratitude. Therefore we have to see the threesome in the *HC* as positioned between the Baptism formula and the Communion formula. The child of the Christian community, following the learning process that leads from Baptism to Communion, learns: I am wretched, I am redeemed and I am called to be grateful.

Before Ursinus wrote the *HC*, a Lutheran Catechism was published in Heidelberg in 1558, in which the threesome is already mentioned.⁵⁰ At the end of this catechism we find a confession of the child, who confesses to be wretched, to be redeemed, and to be called to gratitude. In my opinion the

⁴⁹ Niesel, W., *Bekennnisschriften und Kirchenordnungen der nach Gottes Wort reformierten Kirche*, Zollikon – Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag s.a. 3, 136 et seq.

⁵⁰ *Ein kurtze ordenliche summa der rechten Waren Lehre unsers heiligen Christlichen Glaubens*, Heydelberg 1558.

view on the threesome as expressed both by Ursinus and in the church order of 1563 must be seen in this historical light.

The triptych of baptism formula, *HC* and Communion formula teaches us that knowledge of one of the three parts without the knowledge of the other two can never be real. To separate here is to tear the beautiful tissue of the threesome of Heidelberg.

To conclude: in my opinion the *Kohlbruggian* conception of the threesome does this trinity most justice.