

# **WATCHFULNESS IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE**

## **A STUDY OF WILHELMUS A' BRAKEL'S CONTRIBUTION TO REFORMED SPIRITUALITY**

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**CH 856 The Theology of Wilhelmus à Brakel**

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## Watchfulness in the Wilderness

Watchfulness is a Christian grace and duty that accompanies other spiritual graces, and helps protect against carelessness in our pilgrimage in the Christian life. The Bible redemptive-historically situates believers in the wilderness living as God's people between our beginning return home from exile through the cross and resurrection of Jesus, and our awaiting the full redemption that is to come when our Lord returns (1 Pet. 1:17, 2:9-11; Heb. 11:9, 13-16; 1 Cor. 10:1-11).

The wilderness is a place in redemptive-history that is fraught with difficulties, dangers, and disappointments. The wilderness in Scripture is a place of great temptation and testing for the people of God on their pilgrimage to the Promised Land, yet God is with them, and spiritually at work to use these difficulties as a means to their salvation (Exo. 7:6; Numbers 3:4, 10:12, 13:26, 14:16-35; Psa. 63; 68:7; 78:52; Matt. 4; Heb. 3:8; Rev. 12:6, 14).<sup>1</sup> As Christians, we live in the wilderness, and daily as pilgrims, we must engage in spiritual warfare, and therefore we must never as Christians become careless in our daily walk. It is incumbent upon us and necessary for survival for us to stay watchful in order to grow in our sanctification and avoid the carelessness of other believers who have gone before us. We are no different from them, and must learn from their mistakes and poor examples (1 Cor. 10:1-11; Heb. 3:8).<sup>2</sup> There was much

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<sup>1</sup> Brakel, *Christian's Reasonable Service*, epub (Kindle Location, 15352, chap. 25, 'The Duty to Join the Church and to Remain with Her').

<sup>2</sup> <sup>ESV</sup> **1 Corinthians 10:6,11**: Now these things [in the Old Covenant in the wilderness] took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did....Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.

neglect in the wilderness because of carelessness and neglect, how much more in our day!<sup>3</sup>

Watchfulness in the Christian life is a prayerful and carefully circumspect attitude and focus in living out one's faith. Watchfulness is concerned with always being on guard to the grace and glorious promises of the LORD, and waiting for them. But also watchfulness is concerned with being sober and reminding oneself constantly of the gospel warnings and sober admonitions of Holy Scripture. Watchfulness is an attitude that realizes that as a Christian, one is still in danger and has not made it completely home yet, although eternal life and glory has dawned in the heart of the believer through the Holy Spirit (cf. Rom. 5:3-5). The watchful Christian is making progress in holiness because watchfulness is an aspect of, or fruit of one's holiness in Jesus.

### **Brakel's Important Contribution to Reformed Spirituality**

While other Reformed, experiential theologians, such as the English Puritans encouraged believers with the importance of watchfulness in the Christian life in their writings,<sup>4</sup> it was a unique contribution of Wilhelmus a' Brakel (1635-1711) to actually emphasize it as a particular aspect of piety, or biblical spirituality, and category of sanctification and growing in Christ-likeness in a work of pastoral theology.<sup>5</sup> Wilhelmus

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<sup>3</sup> For example, circumcision was neglected in the wilderness and the Sabbath among many other sins such as idolatry and spiritual presumption and idle worldliness, Joshua 5:5.

<sup>4</sup> Note the English Puritan authors such as John Flavel, John Owen, Richard Baxter, William Gurnall, and Richard Sibbes. Watchfulness in other Reformed, experiential pastor-teachers was not a focused separate topic of sanctification, but a command of being careful in the Christian life, and included in their exegesis of particular passages (for example: ). a Brakel included watchfulness as a separate loci or sub-category of sanctification.

<sup>5</sup> Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service, in which Divine Truths concerning the Covenant of Grace are Expounded, Defended against Opposing Parties, and their Practice Advocated, as well as The*

a' Brakel is an important Reformed forefather in the faith, a faithful minister of the Dutch Further Reformation,<sup>6</sup> and he wrote in his magnum opus *'The Christian's Reasonable Service'* about watchfulness.<sup>7</sup> Brakel demonstrates in his writings a rich, Spirit-infused, biblical-theological knowledge of God's word, and a pastoral heart that is ruthlessly committed to applying the Scriptures to the hearts of the Christ's people.

### Watchfulness as an Aspect of Sanctification

a Brakel believed, along with the English Puritans, that doctrinal truth must be experienced truth and therefore what the Scriptures teach about both the blessings and the dangers of the Christian life must be taken seriously if we are to make progress in our faith. Sanctification is the will of God for the believer and the end goal for all of God's children (1 Thess. 4:3; Eph. 1:3-5). Sanctification is the teaching that we might grow into Christ-like maturity, not perfectly, but substantially by God's grace in this life in reliance upon the power of God's Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:11-16; Gal. 4:19; Phil. 3:9-14).

Brakel wrote

“The Holy Spirit, having infused spiritual life in [believers] at regeneration, maintains that life by His continual influence, stirs it up, activates it, and causes it to function in harmony with its spiritual nature—doing so in that order which God has established as far as the functioning of man's intellect, will, and affections are concerned, as well as the works which proceed from these. Man, being thus moved by the influence of God's

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*Administration of this Covenant in the Old and New Testaments*, Trans. Rev. Bartel Elshout, Ed. Dr. Joel R. Beeke, Vols. I-IV, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011 (Fifth printing)

<sup>6</sup> In Dutch, *Nadere Reformatie*. The Dutch Further Reformation placed matters of faith in God and godly piety central to the church and the people's lives. They longed to apply Scripture properly so that the people of God would grow in grace. See further Bartel Elshout, *The Pastoral and Practical Theology of Wilhelmus a Brakel* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1997), 5-6.

<sup>7</sup> Brakel, Vol. IV, pgs. 11-17. While a very brief part of Brakel's work, nevertheless a unique and helpful section that nuances a certain aspect of the believer's sanctification that is often overlooked.

Spirit, moves, sanctifies Himself, engages in that activity which his new nature desires and is inclined toward, and does that which he knows to be his duty.”<sup>8</sup>

As Christians, a Brakel emphasized that believers should be growing in grace to become more effective and fruitful in our knowledge of the Lord Jesus. Although we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, we nevertheless, are to be committed to growing, and striving strenuously to make progress in the Christian life. A mature Christian, Brakel understood, was one who understood that they had made but a small beginning in holiness. Although in regeneration and in our union with Jesus Christ, the Christian is positionally holy in Christ (1 Cor. 1:30; 6:11), nevertheless holiness must be pursued because there remains much corruption within the Christian.<sup>9</sup>

Growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus is at the heart of true Christianity, the focus of experiential theology, and the reason why it is important to seek to hear and apply all of the teaching of Scripture, by the Holy Spirit, to our hearts.

As we are taught in 2 Peter 1:3-8:

“His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence,<sup>4</sup> by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.<sup>5</sup> For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge,<sup>6</sup> and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness,<sup>7</sup> and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.<sup>8</sup> For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

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<sup>8</sup> Vol. III, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Brakel, Kindle Loc. 14488 (Chap. 24 ‘Concerning the Church’)

Brakel understood as a devoted and caring Reformed pastor, in touch with his own sinful, yet redeemed heart, and living in a time when there was much knowledge of religion without proper experience of it in the heart, that man could easily deceive himself, and thus he uniquely in the writing of his blessed sacred theology including practical observations on the truths taught in each topic of systematic theology. Brakel understood that the believer was to learn doctrine in order for the life of Christ within him to grow; to learn the Scriptures with the head and mind, so that the heart might be warmed and moved to action.

Brakel uniquely focused on watchfulness as an important aspect of practical, experiential knowledge in the Christian life, and a way or means through which God would sanctify His own people. Brakel knew that the growing and fruitful and effective Christian was the watchful Christian. The growing Christian is watchful and careful and prayerful and circumspect, all in dependence upon the Lord's grace and strength. Although we are to watch and pray, and to seek sanctification, it is important for us to remember that anything we have received, any progress we make, is because of the work of God in us (Phil. 2:12-13; 1 Cor. 4:7).

In Volumes three and four of *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, Brakel arranges topically the biblical truths of sanctification and holiness.<sup>10</sup> He teaches what sanctification and holiness mean in our being separated and consecrated to God in our union with Jesus Christ by virtue of the Covenant of Grace. Brakel teaches on God's law

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<sup>10</sup> It is important to note a Brakel's important pastoral emphasis on sanctification and growing in holiness; About 65% of his four volume work is dedicated and focus on the application of salvation, demonstrating his interest in this part of the believer's life.

quite exhaustively, because he understood this was God's revealed will for the believer to grow in grace by keeping God's commandments.<sup>11</sup> The believer is saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, but the true believer in both the Old and New Covenants loves God's commandments, and delights in them (Eph. 2:8-10; Titus 2:11-14; cf. Deut. 6:2; 8:11; Psalm 119:10, 19, 35, 47-48; 1 Cor. 7:19). After his biblical and practical exposition of the Law of God, Brakel focuses on some familiar topics such as profession of Christ and His truth, self-denial, and prayer, particularly the Lord's Prayer.<sup>12</sup> Then Brakel adds his own unique touch in the way he focuses not so familiar topics in a systematic theology as spiritual strength or courage, contentment, patience, uprightness, fasting, watchfulness, solitude, spiritual meditation, and singing.<sup>13</sup> This separate focus on distinct aspects of biblical spirituality reveals how much Brakel was concerned with helping the Christian to grow in specific ways of godliness so that we might flourish in this life, and enjoy eternal felicity and blissful existence with Christ in the next! a' Brakel included watchfulness along with other Christian acts of piety that strengthen believers such as prayer, solitude, fasting, and meditation upon Scripture. We shall look later at how a' Brakel beautifully and biblically brings these all together.

### **What is Watchfulness?**

Brakel demonstrated that one of the blessed privileges and graces of our union with Christ is that we have the ability to be on our guard against all kinds of dangers,

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<sup>11</sup> "One who seeks to be holy has a great love for [God's] Law." Brakel, Vol. III, 21.

<sup>12</sup> See e.g. Calvin's *Institutes*, Book III.

<sup>13</sup> Brakel, Vols. III-IV.

and to keep our focus on Jesus Christ, our Lord and Pioneer in this wilderness and to endure until the end where we shall meet our Lord face to face.

To put watchfulness a bit more positively, it is an opportunity to grow in precision in holiness, and to deepen our knowledge and need of God our Savior, and to trust God's promises through our daily experiences. How many Christians daily fall and backslide because they are not careful in their walk due to a failure of being watchful? We must all rest securely in Jesus, or as 'a Brakel said it so beautifully on his deathbed, let us "rest in my Jesus," remembering that Jesus is particularly our Savior who helps us to be watchful and careful.<sup>14</sup>

The inclusion of this important aspect of piety and sanctification in watchfulness was surely due to our Lord's concerned warnings to His own dear ones, and the often times watchfulness is taught in the Holy Scriptures.<sup>15</sup> At our Lord's time of greatest temptation and testing in Gethsemane, he teaches His disciples the importance of being watchful and careful in their following Him. Perhaps this was due to the fact that our whole lives would be characterized by tribulation and spiritual enemies in this wilderness world (John 16:33; cf. Rev. 1:9). It would seem right that our Lord soberly warned His disciples in the Garden, because all believers stand at every moment upon the precipice of faithful service and worship of our King in His humiliation and exaltation, and the temptation to the denying of Him due to careless, unbelief, hard-heartedness, and other sins that so easily beset us. This scene of our Lord's teaching on the importance of

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<sup>14</sup> From lecture notes by Professor Bart Elshout, September 12, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> <sup>ESV</sup> **Matthew 26:41**: Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."; <sup>ESV</sup> **1 Peter 5:8-9a**: Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. <sup>9</sup> Resist him, firm in your faith...

watchfulness and prayer in the Garden is apt for considering Brakel's teaching drawn forth from the Scriptures and his own experience.

Brakel, in his stirring and deeply biblical and experiential theology made a distinction between spiritual watchfulness and physical watchfulness, both of which are related.

### **Spiritual Watchfulness**

"Spiritual watchfulness consists in watching over the soul in a careful and circumspect manner in order that no evil may befall her."<sup>16</sup>

The value of the soul: Brakel understood that the soul is precious to the believer, and must be guarded and kept. As the Proverbs teach in a different way, the heart, or the internal focus of the soul, must be constantly guarded at all times: "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life" (Prov. 4:23). As our Lord Jesus said to sober His listeners, "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? For what can a man give in return for his life [Gk. soul]?" (Mark 8:36-37). The soul is precious and the heart of man must be guarded lest we be deceived. The heart or soul of man is the very habitation of God for the Christian; we are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16). This calls for a careful and constant examination of what goes in our ears, our eyes, a careful watch over our entire lives.

Spiritual watchfulness pertains to "all that issues forth from the soul, such as thoughts, words, deeds, lest the soul be injured by any sin."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Brakel, Vol. IV, 11.

The person who is spiritually watchful also keeps an “eye out for all that enters the soul, so that no enemy will steal in to harm his spiritual life. He knows his enemies—the devil, the world, and his flesh—and he knows their wickedness and their tireless activity.”<sup>18</sup> Watchfulness is a grace that causes us to take seriously our dangerous plight here in this world. Watchfulness is being cautiously and carefully circumspect, realizing that we are in a dangerous spiritual war (Eph. 6:10-20). Watchfulness helps Christians to remember that we have many enemies “above”, many enemies still “within” us (even though we are united to Jesus Christ we still have remaining, indwelling sin that we must fight against), and many enemies without (such as the devil, the world, and sinful company that can influence carelessness).

Spiritual Life by the Holy Spirit, Like Christ’s Life (ability to follow Jesus’ example):

Spiritual watchfulness pertains to the “spiritual influences of the Holy Spirit, such as light, comfort, and strength—whereby the spiritual life of the soul is strengthened.”<sup>19</sup> As part of the glorious completed work of Christ for sinners, Christ in his exaltation has poured out His Spirit on His people. The Holy Spirit is given to aid us following after Christ. a Brakel emphasized both the work of Jesus Christ by the Spirit and the example was have in Christ for help to us by His Spirit in our own watchfulness.

Christ is the truly watchful man. Christ is the one who has merited a perfect record before God as one like us, yet without sin (Heb. 2:14-18). The Eternal Son of God took our nature to do in our nature what we could not do, and undo what we had sinfully

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<sup>17</sup> Brakel, *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Brakel, *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Brakel, Vol. IV, 12.

done against God in His great holiness and love toward mankind. Christ is our unique Mediator and Savior between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5), who uniquely could uphold God's perfect righteousness and justice, and propitiate God's just wrath so that we could be justified (Rom. 3:24-26), yet Jesus is also given to us as an example to follow. In fact, the Apostle John writes "whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked" (1 Jo. 2:6), and Jesus walked watchfully, carefully, prayerfully, circumspectly. This is an example for us to follow as well (cf. 1 Pet. 2:21).

Prayer: How might we follow our Lord's example in being watchful? Our Lord Jesus would arise before dawn to commune with the Father in prayer so that He would be watchful and careful in the exercise of His ministry for sinners. We are taught "And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed" (Mark 1:35) and "In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God" (Luke 6:12). If the Eternal Son of God in human nature depended prayerfully and watchfully upon God, how much more must we be cautious and careful! We are to be reminded that the same Holy Spirit who aided the Lord Jesus in His spiritual growth as a true man, also has been given to us, His people, so that we too, may make real progress in reliance upon His grace.

As disciple-followers of Jesus Christ our Savior, we are not to follow Jesus from afar like Peter at the time of Jesus's betrayal, but closely.

Watchfulness is often tied to prayer. We are to be watchfully prayerful, and prayerfully watchful.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Colossians 4:2** Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.

The Christians must be watchful against carelessness because of indwelling sin in our own hearts (Prov. 4:23). The unconverted person is foolish, and not concerned about how they spend their life, their time, and they are by nature spiritually drowsy and careless. They are like the foolish virgins who are unprepared and the foolish building who does not build on the rock (Matt. 7:26).<sup>20</sup> But the growing, spiritually wise and honest upright believer prays this prayer to God, knowing that His heart can be self-deceptive, and who can know a deceptive heart (Jer. 17:9-10)? “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” (Psa. 139:23-24). Believers know that one of the most dangerous enemies of the Christian life is one’s self, one’s own heart! “We carry the seed of uncleanness within, which will very readily shoot up if we do not carefully watch against this. Happy is he who has a true heart of a virgin, for when this sin takes hold, it cannot very easily be driven out. Therefore, watch!”<sup>21</sup>

True believers who are growing in sanctification and are defined scripturally as upright in their character understand their daily need to be watchful and to do battle against their indwelling sins.

“They are concerned about this, since they mistrust their hearts and become conscious of their corrupt impulses. They bring their heart before the Lord and pray, ‘Search me, O God, and know my heart...’ ....This is true in a general and universal sense of the word as

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<sup>20</sup> Brakel, Vol. IV, 133.

<sup>21</sup> Brakel, Vol. III, 212.

far as matters, time, and place are concerned; they make no exception whatsoever. Regardless of whether they fall more into the one sin than the other, it is nevertheless contrary to their intent and the wishes of their heart; it grieves them. Yes, in secret they are much more upright than they are in the presence of men, and their heart is even more upright in principle than it is in its manifestation...these matters are true evidences of uprightness.”<sup>22</sup>

An upright disposition is particularly a watchful disposition. Upright, true believers are willing to acknowledge their remaining corruption and seek for sincerity and truthfulness from the heart. The upright believer acknowledges their impotence and powerlessness apart from the Holy Spirit; As Jesus reminded believers: “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). The upright believer pays careful attention to one’s own heart, and when there is insincerity, they grieve over it and confess it. The upright believer remains in continual acknowledgment of walking ‘coram Deo’ or in the presence of God.<sup>23</sup>

We so easily fall into hard-heartedness and temptations to pride and hypocrisy. Hebrews 3:8 warns all believers to be cautious of unbelief that leads to hard-hearts. “...Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness...”. The old nature in the redeemed soul still strives to sin and gain strength. The old man or old nature gains strength in the soul primarily through recklessness and

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<sup>22</sup> Brakel, Vol. III, 435-36.

<sup>23</sup> Brakel, Vol. III, 441.

carelessness in the Christian. “A person will bring himself into situations, knowing from experience that they have repeatedly ensnared him,”<sup>24</sup> and thus it is important to be watchful in our daily walk. The old nature is always engaged in keeping man from doing what is good. The new nature in contrast, is infused with the blessed Holy Spirit, and it is watchful against sin. Sin robs the soul of nourishment and opportunity, and the converted, watchful soul has learned to which sin her nature is most inclined and which circumstances will cause sin to arise the most, as well as render it strength.<sup>25</sup>

As growing Christians we desire to love God from our hearts and so we must be aware of our thoughts, our intentions, our affections as well as our actions. It is important to remember that all of our actions result from inward thoughts, motives, intentions, and affections of the heart. If we are to truly change as Christians, we must do more than try to behave better externally. We must have a heart change. We must ask the Holy Spirit to forgive us of our remaining sins, and the wickedness we still get glimpses of in our thoughts, intentions and affections. In being able by God’s Spirit to see the frightening sinfulness still remaining in the believer’s thought-life, one is humbled, and able to pray for greater help and is encouraged to deeper dependence upon Jesus. Brakel, in his excellent section on the Lord’s Prayer, applying his thoughts to “Lead us not into temptation, but delivers us from evil,” wrote:

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<sup>24</sup> Brakel, Vol. III, 9-10.

<sup>25</sup> Brakel, Vol. III, 13.

“What is implied when the godly pray: ‘Lead us not into temptation’? ...The petition is as follows: ‘Neither let the temptation get a hold of nor have power over us; do not withdraw Thy Holy Spirit from us; do not give us over to ourselves when opportunities for sin manifest themselves. When the enemies assault us and seek to toss us to and fro and to sift us as wheat, let us then not be overpowered by the temptation. Do not let us be ensnared so that unrighteousness would gain the upper hand; neither give us over to evil inclinations nor to the lusts of the corrupt heart...’<sup>26</sup>

It is also important to note, that while a Brakel warns us against our indwelling sin, and the importance of being watchful over our hearts, sin no longer has dominion over us. Christ Jesus has not only died in our place as our substitutionary atonement to take away our sins, but He has died and risen again to give us victory over our sins. Let us be encouraged by a Brakel’s pastoral admonishment:

“Time and again [in the Christian walk, no matter how many times one stumbles] there is a new resolve to do battle against sin; there is prayer for strength, and, desiring to be strengthened, there is a receiving of Jesus by faith unto sanctification. The godly fear that sin may take them by surprise and thus they seek to be watchful....Sin has no dominion when this union results in delight, a love for, and a desire to do whatever pleases the Lord.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Brakel, Vol. III, 580-81.

<sup>27</sup> Brakel, Vol. I, 399.

We are by nature drowsy.<sup>28</sup>

Be moderate. Seek others who will be alert and watchful with you, and to awaken you if you fall asleep in warfare. Be busy in serving Christ and others: “Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.....Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes” (Matt. 24:42, 46).<sup>29</sup>

The enemies of our soul are never-ceasing and tireless in their temptations and taunts.<sup>30</sup>

Watchfulness understands that there is a constant danger from our enemy, the devil.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Peter 5:8** Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

We must be constantly watchful against enemies “above” or personal, wicked spiritual beings, and enemies of all good who are called in Scripture the “devil and his angels” (Matt. 25:41). The Bible tells us to be watchful against the Devil and his schemes or wiles or tricks (2 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 6:11). Brakel lists three primary ways of Satan’s assaults on believers that we should be aware of. He wrote:

“The methods of Satan’s assaults are manifold. They can, however, be reduced to three main headings. (1) Sometimes his activity is focused upon man’s five senses. He does so either by impeding their function while simultaneously stimulating the imagination—

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<sup>28</sup> Brakel, *ibid*, 13.

<sup>29</sup> Brakel, Vol. IV, 14.

<sup>30</sup> Brakel, *ibid*.

whereby a person is of the opinion to have truly seen those things—or his presence is audibly or visibly perceived due to a physical appearance. (2) Sometimes he only stimulates the imagination, be it when man is either awake or is dreaming—during daylight or darkness. (3) Sometimes he operates by speaking directly to the soul, which is all the more evident when he presents nonphysical matters and arguments to the soul.”<sup>31</sup>

The devil would focus his temptations upon where the believer is weak.

“He knows the constitution of the body as well as its vulnerability; he knows the sin most likely to be committed, and he knows in what circumstances we must at all times be to do so. Along with this he interjects thoughts and mental images in our imagination whereby he endeavors to make us think about such thoughts, stimulating our lusts by such reflections.”<sup>32</sup>

All the evil one can do is to suggest, entice, and create situations, but we must be watchful and on guard against His evil schemes!<sup>33</sup> We are to overcome the evil one by being much in prayer, by leaning upon and depending upon Jesus’ strength in our weakness. We are to look to Christ by eyes of faith, and behold the Lamb of God, and the Strong Savior for Sinners in the conflict. We are to pray and then wait upon Him for our deliverance; He is faithful.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Brakel, Vol. I, 301.

<sup>32</sup> Brakel, Vol. III, 577-78.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Brakel, Vol. IV, 247.

Though we are watchful, we need never fear our enemies.<sup>35</sup> We are more than overcomers through Him who loved us...

### **Physical Watchfulness**

Physical watchfulness is defined by Brakel as “depriving one’s self of sleep at a time which is designated for sleep.”<sup>36</sup>

A caution against mere externalism and works-oriented Christianity in such activities as vigils that have been practiced by the Roman Catholic Church.

### **Four Important Types of Watchfulness**

There are three main types of watchfulness that Brakel focuses upon: watching...and praying’ watching...and waiting; watching...and meditation. Watchfulness must be accompanied by the spiritual exercises of seeking after God by means of prayer, reading and meditation on Scripture.<sup>37</sup> Brakel teaches how this brings a tender heart in the redeemed soul that is characterized by watchfulness and spiritual wrestling.

### **Watching and Praying**

We are to watch and pray. Watchful praying and a prayerful watchfulness is necessary to be a fruitful and growing Christian.<sup>38</sup> When Jesus addressed his weak and tired disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane as He was going the way of suffering for

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<sup>35</sup> Brakel, *ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Brakel, *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Brakel, Vol. IV., 15-16.

<sup>38</sup> “It is a watchful praying and a prayerful watchfulness; they mutually stimulate each other....By way of prayerful watchfulness and watchful prayer, the body (which yields much opportunity for sin and stimulates us toward sin) is subdued and rendered more useful,” Brakel, Vol. IV, 15-16.

them, he joined these two important acts of spirituality together. Let no man put them asunder. Prayer is simply communion with God, and dependence upon God, and offering up to God requests in Christ's Name, and according to God's will, to our Heavenly Father, in reliance upon and assistance from the Holy Spirit. To pray is to be dependent, and it activates a certain watchfulness in us.

Our prayer life because it is focused on God the Father in Christ, in reliance upon the Holy Spirit<sup>39</sup> causes us to be aware of our ongoing and constant dependence upon God's grace, power and help in order for us to be fruitful. As Jesus teaches in John's Gospel, we must "abide in Him," or "remain in Him" resting, depending, trusting, being uplifted and strengthened by His grace.

Thus prayer and watchfulness must go together. As we pray and then are able to be more constant and faithful and precise in our watchfulness, so the more we watch and the more we see of the dangers above, within, and around us, the more we will know our need for prayer.

Watching with prayer doesn't mean that we will necessarily see the answers to our prayers immediately, but we will begin to see immediately what we need, and more desperately than before. One of the blessings of a prayer life is having a ravished and radiant soul that desires to seek after God with holy longings, and to ask and seek as an enjoyable end in itself, knowing that God makes us to see more clearly how much we need Him and what He has done for us."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Brakel, Vol. III, 444-481.

<sup>40</sup> See section on "Exhortations to Prayer", Brakel, Vol. III, 468ff.

## Watching and Waiting

Watching and waiting also go together. As we learned in Psalm 5:3, the Psalmist prayed, then watched to see how God would answer his request. In watching, there was an expectant waiting for God to answer his prayer. The prophet Habakkuk sought God as a watchman, to “see what God would say to him” in response to his prayerful dialog and concerns he had addressed to God: “I will take my stand at my watchpost and station myself on the tower, and look out to see what he will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint” (Hab. 2:1). It was not a literal watchpost that Habakkuk climbed up upon to see, but was a metaphor for his watchful waiting upon God, expectantly hoping in God’s answer.

## Watching and Meditation

Watching and meditation also go together. We are to meditate upon God’s promises in order to be reminded of the grace and power that God has provided for believers in the Covenant of Grace in union with Jesus Christ! What great privileges we have, as well as great gospel warnings that remind us of the constant dangers in this present age. Meditation upon Scripture helps us to remember that God’s Words is a light to our feet and a lamp to our path (Psa. 119:105) as we walk circumspectly in this world. We need more than Biblical information or mere truth of Scripture, these truths must penetrate our hearts, and give us real wisdom so that we can live carefully and prayerfully and wisely in the wilderness of this present age. “See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise” (Eph. 5:15, KJV).<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Circumspect from Greek word *akribos*. Brakel notes that in our language this is indicative of seeing ahead, or of being prudent, wise and using discretion. Brakel, Vol. IV, 129.

## Watching God's Providence

Let us perceive God's hand through secondary causes.<sup>42</sup> Watching God's providence helps us to see our Father's kind and strong hand each of our days as we walk faithfully with Him in this world. a' Brakel encourages believers to "look beyond the secondary causes and see my Heavenly Father."<sup>43</sup> He wrote more fully:

"Accustom yourself by frequent meditations, attentive observation, and diligent exercises to believingly observe God's hand in all things. As you would observe the rays of the sun entering a room through a window, observe His preservation, cooperation, and government, concerning both creatures and their activity. Accustom yourself continually to discern God's active hand....All...things, from the least to the greatest, are under God's control...May you...continually perceive God's hand working in and by secondary causes in such a manner as if these causes did not exist...to see God at work."<sup>44</sup>

Advantages of Watchfulness in Scripture – Confidence before God: Believers are often exhorted to be watchful in Holy Scripture. The Apostle Paul's final words to the Christians at Corinth are to "Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong" (1 Cor. 16:13).

Confidence in Prayer: Watchfulness is tied to prayer and meditation, and has an expectancy that God will do good toward His people:

ESV Psalm 5:3 O LORD, in the morning you hear my voice; in the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch.

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<sup>42</sup> Brakel, Vol. I, 349.

<sup>43</sup> Brakel, *ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Brakel, *ibid.*, Vol. I, pgs. 349-50.

Confidence in God: Watchfulness has a confidence in God and His strength as he watches over the believer.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Psalm 59:9** O my Strength, I will watch for you, for you, O God, are my fortress.

Confidence on the Day of Judgement: Our Lord Jesus particularly understood the peril of redeemed yet still careless disciples who could allow their weakness to cause their own peril and even tempt them to deny the Savior who loved and bought them.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Matthew 26:40-41:** And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, "So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

Confidence in times of temptation: The Apostle Paul warns believers to be watchful over themselves, and the sin that still remains in their hearts ready to deceive them.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Galatians 6:1** Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.

Confidence in Ministry: The Apostle Paul taught his own disciple Timothy how important, especially as a pastor, that one keep a careful watch on himself in both life and doctrine. Note the way the Apostle Paul focuses with primacy on the pastor's self before his doctrine, emphasizing how important we are to watch over our own hearts and lives. If our teaching is to be received by God's people, they must see us being careful, and watchful over our own hearts. A pastor can have the truth in doctrine, and

be extremely watchful in making sure all of his theology is right, but then undermine his entire ministry through carelessness and lack of watchfulness over one's sinful and deceiving heart!

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Timothy 4:16** Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.

We are taught to be watchful as the focus of living our faith.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Corinthians 16:13** Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong.

Antinomian spirit of not taking God's law seriously in the Christian life. The Law has been given to teach us the will of God for our sanctification.<sup>45</sup>

### **Why Brakel's Emphasis is Needed in Today's Church**

Why we need a' Brakel's particular contribution today so desperately? a' Brakel's unique contribution should be taught so that his helpful teaching will have an ongoing contribution and influence in Christ's Church. In the Lord Jesus' final hours, He told His disciples who had been with Him closely through His ministry that one of them would betray Him. The disciples' response to this, should be considered soberly by every Christian. It ought to call us all to a closer, more holy watchfulness in Christ! None of the disciples truly know their own hearts. In fact, they ask the Lord, "Master, is it I? The disciples were not sure of their own hearts. Perhaps all of them had been tempted to deny the Lord in this way; it seems so. This should make us all the more careful and

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<sup>45</sup> Brakel, Vol. III, pg. 54ff for excellent discussion on the errors of Antinomianism.

watchful as Christ's disciples now; we should all be watchfully asking: "Master, is it I? today?"<sup>46</sup>

In my own ministry as a pastor over the last twelve years, I have been blessed through greatly difficult trials to see my own sinfulness and hypocrisy in my heart of hearts! I labored faithfully in God's Word in His vineyard for the first seven years of ministry, but with an unbiblical and blind understanding of my own sins and hypocrisy!

I labored publicly in the ministry without others being able to discern, being faithful to exposit the Scriptures verse by verse, and with a Christ-centered focus and application, with no real understanding of how self-deceived I was. I lived as a sinful hypocrite, ineffective and unproductive in my knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, and living a lie that only my wife could see to a certain extent, but could not explain. I was faithful to God's Word externally, but did not truly have God's Word dwelling in my heart within. I was not walking watchfully, carefully, prayerfully, circumspectly. As a minister and man I did not love prayer, God's Word (except that it was something to know and teach), and I did not walk as I should.

How many more are in the ministry, laboring faithfully on the surface, but inside they are fully of dead men's bones. I am not sure if I was unconverted in my first few years of ministry. I thought that I had been truly converted over twenty years ago, but there was no real assurance until five years ago when I discovered how much criticism, hypocrisy, unfaithfulness, and sinfulness had been hiding in my heart without me being as aware

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<sup>46</sup> ESV **Matthew 26:22** And they were very sorrowful and began to say to him one after another, "Is it I, Lord?" ESV **Mark 14:19** They began to be sorrowful and to say to him one after another, "Is it I?"

as I should have been. How many more are living in this same way today? I would think quite a few, I imagine.

I think that Brakel's unique contribution in emphasis to Reformed Spirituality should be on watchfulness, so that we can grow as Christians, and especially as ministers and to know as much as is possible the great evils that still remain within us, the evil above and around us that we are powerless to overcome without the Holy Spirit, and how fragile we are without the LORD Jesus, and the great need we have for deeper dependence and acknowledgement of our dire neediness before Him!

### **Are You A Watchful Christian?**

Are you a true and growing believer, watchful and careful and prayerful and circumspect in your life? Do you care about the honor of God, and the precious value of your soul? Do you know of the Christ who died for you, and does it grieve you deeply to grieve such a wonderful and glorious Savior?

Are you in touch with your sinful carelessness, and your spiritual apathy? Does the sins of your thought life, motivations, and love of the world cause you to repent and cry out to God for more help and the power of His Spirit?

It is very important to examine yourself to see if you be in the faith (2 Cor. 13:5). Have you truly been regenerated? Are you born again by the Holy Spirit of God and living before the face of God? Search yourself closely. You are either a child of God or a slave of satan; either a privileged and blessed heir of the Heavenly Kingdom or a depraved soul awaiting the just sentence of a holy God into everlasting hell fire and

wrath. Have you asked yourself: “Master, Is it I?!” who denies you with my life and doctrine?

If we do not examine ourselves, we become careless. Are you bearing fruit for God? While your thoughts and intentions are tainted by sin, do you offer to God your works in Christ through a sincere faith, a pure heart, and a clear conscience (1 Tim. 1:5)? Are you conscious of the evils that dwell in your heart? If so, are you aware of your great need for Christ’s strength, blessed love, joyful presence, and constant forgiveness?!

Remember there are many who will say to the Lord on that Day of Great Judgment: “Lord, Lord,” and Jesus will say “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of iniquity” (Matt. 7:21-23). As our Lord Jesus asks probingly of the sinners, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord’ and not do what I tell you?” (Luke 6:46).

Let us progress in our sanctification by God’s grace, in reliance upon the work of the Holy Spirit, and because of the privileges granted to us in the Covenant of Grace by God the Father through the Eternal and Blessed Son! Let us progress in our effectiveness and fruitfulness in the Christian life for the glory of Jesus, coming to the place of enjoying joyful assurance, by making our calling and election sure (2 Pet. 1:7-11). As Brakel wrote as a warning against carelessness and a sober admonition to watchfulness:

“ Even though it is possible to come to this realization by the grace of the Holy Spirit, not every one does. Many thousands will go to hell who imagine that they will enter heaven. There will also be many, however, who will enter heaven who feared that they would not arrive there...In some true partakers of the covenant of grace there is still much darkness, so that they do not have a clear perception of what constitutes sufficient light and life...So much of the old man yet remains in them—a fact upon which they focus to such an extent that they question whether this can coexist with grace—that they live

between hope and fear...Consider...how necessary it is that we scrutinize our hearts and examine ourselves as to who and how we are.”<sup>47</sup>

*“Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (2 Peter 1:10-11).*

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<sup>47</sup> Brakel, Vol. II, 310.

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