

# Dependent Flourishing in the Nadere Reformatie: Wilhelmus à Brakel on Desire, Self-Denial, and the Christian Life

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Keywords: Desire, Abundance, Self-Denial, Nadere Reformatie, Wilhelmus à Brakel, Human Flourishing  
<https://doi.org/10.66991/001c.164812>

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This article retrieves Wilhelmus à Brakel's theology of desire as a Reformed account of dependent flourishing. Set against the commercial expansion and moral anxieties of the Dutch Golden Age, it argues that à Brakel understood human beings as desiring creatures whose fulfillment rests not in accumulation, comparison, or self-assertion, but in communion with God. His treatments of covetousness, contentment, and self-denial show how fallen desire becomes restless when detached from God, and how grace redirects desire through the Spirit's work of mortification and vivification. In dialogue with Aristotle and Aquinas, the article clarifies à Brakel's continuity with classical teleological accounts of flourishing while highlighting his distinctively Reformed emphasis on dependence, affective renewal, and cruciform self-denial. It further shows how this theology became practically operative in economic life, where possessions, vocation, stewardship, and generosity served as concrete arenas for the reordering of desire. À Brakel's vision offers a timely resource for addressing late-modern consumer anxiety and self-constructed visions of the good life.

Human beings are fundamentally desiring creatures.<sup>1</sup> Created in the image of God to seek, love, and delight in their Creator, they possess an innate orientation toward what they perceive as good. Yet after the fall, this capacity for desire became profoundly misdirected. Rather than resting in God, the human heart often pursues finite goods with an intensity that they cannot sustain. The result

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<sup>1</sup> See James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Baker Academic, 2009); James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Brazos, 2016). Smith argues that the human person is fundamentally a desiring being whose misdirected loves produce disintegration and anxiety. Also see Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods* (Dutton, 2009), where Keller portrays disordered desire as a source of modern anxiety; see also Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God* (Viking, 2016). Cornelius Plantinga Jr. also discusses disordered desire (concupiscence) producing inner unrest in *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Eerdmans, 1995); Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford University Press, 1991), 13.9.10.

is a pattern of restlessness, comparison, and spiritual instability that recurs throughout history whenever abundance magnifies the possibilities for disordered love.

Periods of rapid economic expansion have repeatedly exposed the moral and spiritual fragilities of human desire. Moments of material abundance, rather than calming the heart, often generate new forms of anxiety as expanding possibilities widen the perceived gap between what is possessed and what is imagined. This recurring tension between prosperity and restlessness constitutes a historical pattern that illuminates the present crisis of desire in late-modern consumer culture.<sup>2</sup>

The seventeenth-century Dutch Republic offers a striking early example of this dynamic. During the so-called Golden Age, unprecedented commercial success, global trade, and the rise of speculative finance produced a society marked by both prosperity and unease. Cultural observers frequently described an “embarrassment of riches,” noting that economic growth generated not only comfort but also heightened susceptibility to distraction, envy, and the disordered pursuit of gain.<sup>3</sup> In this milieu, Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635–1711), a leading pastor-theologian of the *Nadere Reformatie* (Dutch Second Reformation), developed a nuanced theology of desire that sought to guide Christians through the pressures associated with affluence. His writings diagnosed the spiritual pathologies that accompanied abundance and articulated an ordered pattern of life grounded in self-denial, dependence, and communion with God.

Contemporary conditions reveal analogous concerns. Although the digital economy has replaced mercantile capitalism, the underlying spiritual condition remains strikingly similar. Late-modern culture amplifies mimetic comparison and inflames desire, encouraging individuals to curate and display autonomous selves shaped by consumption and performance. Popular discourse often

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2 René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), 8–9. For Girard, modernity is marked by “internal mediation,” in which the diminished distance between subject and mediator turns the model into a rival. This produces an “ontological sickness” in which desire becomes metaphorical—aimed not simply at objects but at the “being” of the mediator—and assumes the form of “deviated transcendence.” See Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 53, 61–62, 96. This logic of internalized rivalry may be placed in conversation with Byung-Chul Han’s account of late-capitalist subjectivity in *The Burnout Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford University Press, 2015). Han argues that the disciplinary subject has given way to the achievement-subject, who engages in voluntary self-exploitation; in this condition, “the achievement-subject is simultaneously perpetrator and victim, master and slave.” Han, *The Burnout Society*, 11, 49.

3 Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1987).

interprets this restlessness in psychological terms, such as the “Fear of Missing Out” (FOMO). Yet these phenomena are more adequately understood as expressions of disordered desire and late-modern anxiety, symptoms that point to a deeper theological disorientation.<sup>4</sup> When desire is detached from its proper end in God, it becomes a source of instability and fear rather than of rest.<sup>5</sup>

This study argues that à Brakel’s theology of desire offers a constructive framework for addressing this crisis. His account of self-denial did not advocate ascetic withdrawal; rather, it functioned as a means of reordering misdirected loves and restoring the soul’s orientation toward God. By presenting human beings as dependent creatures whose flourishing was grounded in divine sufficiency, à Brakel articulated what may be described as “dependent flourishing”—a mode of life in which freedom and happiness arise not from self-assertion but from acknowledging one’s creaturely limits.

The argument unfolds in four stages. First, it situates à Brakel within the socioeconomic tensions of the Dutch Golden Age, drawing a historical parallel to the desire-driven anxieties characteristic of the contemporary consumer economy. Second, it reconstructs his theology of desire, with particular attention to covetousness, contentment, and the formative power of self-denial. Third, it places his account in dialogue with classical teleological traditions, especially Aristotle and Aquinas, in order to clarify the distinctively Reformed features of dependent flourishing. Finally, it considers the practical implications of this framework, showing how the dynamics of mortification and vivification offer moral resources for negotiating the pressures of modern consumer culture.

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4 The instability of desire in the present moment—its hyper-mimetic, competitive, and compulsive character—points to an underlying crisis of human purpose and flourishing. Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 1–52. Girard posits that human desire is “mimetic” (derivative and imitative) rather than autonomous.

5 Augustine, *Confessions* 1.1, 12.9.10; Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, ed. and trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 11.28.

## Socioeconomic Context of the Seventeenth-Century Netherlands

The seventeenth century, often designated the Dutch Golden Age, marks the period in which the Dutch Republic was consolidated and the cultural foundations of the Netherlands were firmly established.<sup>6</sup> This was an era in which the Republic enjoyed the unusual conjunction of ecclesial vitality and expanding economic prosperity. Humanist culture and Calvinism together shaped the distinctive character of Dutch society. The Erasmian regents, motivated in part by commercial pragmatism, supported forms of religious toleration that contributed to the emergence of a pluralistic and cosmopolitan public sphere. Economic growth, however, introduced new moral tensions. Calvinist teaching offered a framework for piety and restraint, yet townspeople increasingly wrestled with the question of how to reconcile newfound prosperity with Christian morality, a dilemma that prompted anxiety over whether unchecked enjoyment of material abundance might imperil the soul.<sup>7</sup>

The economy of the Republic expanded continuously, and numerous sectors of industry and trade flourished. Public confidence in financial growth remained high.<sup>8</sup> One striking illustration of the interplay between exuberant commercial culture and moral anxiety is the well-known tulip trade. The Republic's thriving markets fostered an ethos of economic self-assurance that was only modestly constrained by religious warnings against greed and speculation. The peak expression of this exuberance was the "tulip mania" of the mid-1630s, during which a single bulb could command the price of a fine house. Although the bubble collapsed abruptly in 1637, the broader culture of speculation and the zeal for profit persisted.<sup>9</sup>

Economic flourishing nonetheless possessed a darker social underside. The Dutch Republic, and Amsterdam in particular, became a major hub of global commerce and finance, including the rapidly developing stock market.<sup>10</sup> The Golden Age

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6 Willem J. van Asselt and Paul H. A. M. Abels, "The Seventeenth Century," in *Handbook of Dutch Church History*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 259.

7 James C. Kennedy, *A Concise History of the Netherlands* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 151–53.

8 Maarten Prak, *The Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century: The Golden Age* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 87–110.

9 Kennedy, *A Concise History of the Netherlands*, 168; Prak, *The Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century*, 87–89.

10 Van Asselt and Abels, "The Seventeenth Century," 269; Kennedy, *A Concise History of the Netherlands*, 142–50

was undeniably an age of plenty, yet wealth was distributed more unevenly than ever before.<sup>11</sup> Vigorous growth brought unprecedented prosperity, but its benefits did not extend to all levels of society. A considerable portion of the population remained untouched by the Republic's riches, while the urban elite grew disproportionately wealthy.<sup>12</sup> Portraits of patricians and guild leaders, so abundant in Dutch art, represented only a small fraction of the populace. In Amsterdam, the well-to-do bourgeoisie, shopkeepers, and guild craftsmen were outnumbered by those living in or near poverty. Even in prosperous decades, 15 to 20 percent of city residents lived in indigence. Many survived as day laborers whose wages offered little or no financial security.<sup>13</sup>

Within this context, Amsterdam acquired a reputation as a prominent center of vice. Owen Feltham (1602–68), the English writer who visited the city, famously remarked that “to call a man an Amsterdamer, is as much as to say, he is no Christian.”<sup>14</sup> Consistory and Mennonite records from the seventeenth century reveal persistent concerns about public drunkenness, brawling, illicit sexuality, and the tavern culture that turned many inns into sites of disorder rather than harmless recreation.<sup>15</sup> The life and culture of Dutch society diverged significantly from the moral expectations of the Reformed faith. Consequently, Reformed theologians emphasized the need for further reform of both church and society.<sup>16</sup> *Nadere Reformatie* theologians interpreted these patterns as symptoms of spiritual degeneration.<sup>17</sup> Despite the Republic's formal adherence to Reformed doctrine, they perceived a widening gap between confession and daily conduct and repeatedly warned against adultery, prostitution, drunkenness, frivolity, ribaldry, ostentation, and Sabbath profanation. Feltham's sharp comment thus captures a broader contemporary perception. Amsterdam had become

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11 Prak, *The Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century*, 125; Kennedy, *A Concise History of the Netherlands*, 172.

12 Prak, *The Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century*, 125.

13 Kennedy, *A Concise History of the Netherlands*, 172.

14 Owen Feltham, “A Trip to Holland Being a Description of the Country, People and Manners: As Also Some Select Observations on Amsterdam,” 10; Early English Books Online, University of Michigan Library Digital Collections, <https://name.umdl.umich.edu/A41087.0001.001>.

15 Troy Osborne, “Church Discipline and Dutch Mennonite Identity in the Seventeenth Century,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 35, no. 2 (2017): 5–28.

16 C. Graafland, W. J. op 't Hof, and F. A. van Lieburg, “Nadere Reformatie: Opnieuw een poging tot begripsbepaling,” *Documentatieblad Nadere Reformatie* 19 (1995): 125–26.

17 Fred van Lieburg, “From Pure Church to Pious Culture: The Further Reformation in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Republic,” in *Later Calvinism: International Perspectives*, ed. W. Fred Graham (Northeast Missouri State University Press, 1994), 409–29.

emblematic of a prosperous yet morally disordered republic in which crime, commercialized sex, and religious indifference coexisted with confident public claims to Christian identity.

The social structure of the Republic further reflected the complexity of the age. Although rigid ranks were not sharply defined, economic distinctions were significant. Dutch society comprised an urban bourgeoisie led by an exceptionally wealthy merchant elite, an elevated clerical class, and a nobility whose influence remained strongest in the eastern provinces. Beyond the peasantry, urban residents generally fell into three groups: (1) merchants, industrialists, lawyers, and physicians; (2) the shopkeeping middle class; and (3) wage laborers in industry, trade, shipping, and domestic service, workers with limited opportunity for upward mobility.<sup>18</sup> Despite relatively high average incomes, begging and vagrancy were widespread in both town and countryside, often accompanied by rising rates of petty crime. Municipal authorities and diaconates responded by establishing poorhouses, orphanages, and disciplinary institutions. Heavy taxation exacerbated disparities between rich and poor and heightened social tensions.<sup>19</sup>

These socioeconomic realities illuminate the ethical preoccupations of Reformed pastors during the period. The *Nadere Reformatie* functioned not merely as a renewal of individual piety but as a broader project of societal reform. Concerns about greed, luxury, and moral laxity shaped their preaching and moral instruction, and these same concerns form an essential background for understanding à Brakel's theology of desire and human flourishing.

## À Brakel's Theology of Desire: Created, Corrupted, Redirected

For à Brakel, desire belonged to the very structure of human nature as created by God.<sup>20</sup> Human beings were not fashioned as self-contained agents who possessed sufficiency in themselves, but as creatures whose fullness consisted in

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18 Van Asselt and Abels, "The Seventeenth Century," 269–70.

19 Van Asselt and Abels, "The Seventeenth Century," 270; Prak, *The Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century*, 77–84.

20 Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 4 vols., ed. Joel R. Beeke, trans Bartel Elshout (Reformation Heritage Books, 1992–1995), 3:238; hereafter *CRS*.

participation in the goodness of their Creator.<sup>21</sup> Desire therefore was not an accident of human psychology or merely a consequence of finitude. It was the God-given inclination of the soul toward its proper object.<sup>22</sup> Human beings were created to seek, to long, and to rest, and that rest was found in communion with God. In this sense, desire was inherently teleological. It pressed beyond immediate satisfactions and temporal goods toward the one in whom true life, peace, and joy reside.<sup>23</sup>

À Brakel described the human person as an “empty vessel” that could only receive what God bestowed.<sup>24</sup> The language of emptiness did not indicate nihilism but dependence. The creature did not originate its own blessedness. It received life, light, and love from God and was ordered to delight in this reception. Desire, in its original integrity, was the movement of the heart toward God as the supreme good and, at the same time, the grateful reception of created goods as tokens of divine generosity.<sup>25</sup> In the state of rectitude, the soul’s longing and the body’s needs were harmonized. Bodily desires were directed toward what was fitting, and spiritual desire was directed exclusively toward God as the source and end of all good.<sup>26</sup>

Within this framework, desire was not a problem to be overcome but a gift to be properly ordered. To be human was to be *capax Dei*, capable of God, precisely as a desiring creature.<sup>27</sup> The question was not whether one desired but how and

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21 À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:238.

22 À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:238.

23 À Brakel’s account of desire and its teleological orientation shares certain structural affinities with Aristotle, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas. Yet, as will be discussed below, his understanding ultimately departs from Aristotle and shows greater continuity with Augustinian affective spirituality. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Harvard University Press, 1926), 1.7; Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1; Augustine, *City of God*, bk. 14; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 5 vols. (Benziger Brothers, 1947), I-II, qq. 1–5; hereafter *ST*.

24 À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:238, 449. “Man is not self-sufficient; he cannot satisfy himself with himself. He is but an empty vessel, only capable of receiving something. He must find his fulfillment by matters which are exterior to himself—both according to soul and body. He must have food, drink, air, and light, will it be well with his body. According to the soul, he must have something spiritual and infinite—that is God Himself—in order for his infinite desire to be satisfied” (3:238). He also stated, “Man is but an empty vessel who must obtain his fulfillment from elsewhere—from a source external to himself. To that end the Lord has given man the ability to desire and to give expression to his desires” (3:449).

25 À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:97–98, 237–38.

26 À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:237–38, 523–24. “Among all creatures upon earth, only man knows God as Creator, preserver, ruler, and lawgiver. When man was still in the state of rectitude, he joyously acknowledged the majesty, supremacy, and other perfections of the Lord. . . . When God converts a person, however, his own will is most burdensome and grievous to himself. He hates it, strives against it, and would extract it by its very root if he were able to. He loves the will of God, and to do this will would be all his desire and delight. Yes, since he loves God, it is his desire that not only he, but that all men would acknowledge, honor, and fear God in His majesty and sovereign rule, and be obedient to Him” (3:523–24).

27 À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:237–38, 449, 523–24. See also Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1; *City of God*, bk. 14.

toward what one desired. The original orientation of desire toward God provided the standard by which à Brakel later diagnosed the corruption of desire under sin and the need for its redirection by grace.

The fall did not eradicate desire; it disordered it. Under the power of original sin, the image of God in the soul was obscured, and what à Brakel called the “evil disposition” of both soul and body took hold. He wrote:

The evil disposition of soul and body is prohibited, for original sin consists in the absence of the image of God and in the possession of the image of the devil. The soul misses true light, love, life, peace, and holiness, yes, God Himself. Instead, she is in a state of darkness, death, unrest, and pollution. Furthermore, the disposition of the body is evil, as a result of which it has numerous inordinate inclinations and thus stirs up the soul to lust in a variety of manners. This disposition is the fountain of all kinds of sinful motions.<sup>28</sup>

The creature who once delighted in God’s presence now turned restlessly toward created goods that could not bear the weight of its longing. Desire continued to search for satisfaction, but the direction of its search had shifted.

This corruption involved both the inner disposition of the soul and the appetites of the body. The body became subject to inordinate inclinations that continually stirred up the soul toward lust in manifold forms.<sup>29</sup> These inclinations and motions were not neutral impulses that the will happened to misuse. They formed a deep pattern of misdirected love. Temporal goods such as wealth, honor, and bodily comfort, which were intended to be received with gratitude in ordered relation to God, became objects of ultimate concern. The affections attached themselves to these finite goods and treated them as if they could secure lasting happiness.

À Brakel described Christians as placing their hope in God, for their satisfaction was found in union and communion with him. As creatures made in the image of God, they were called to cultivate a spiritual disposition of heart that gave rise

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<sup>28</sup> À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:239.

<sup>29</sup> À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:239–40; see also Augustine, *City of God*, 15.22–23. Similarly, Augustine defined virtue in terms of the proper order of love.

to every form of holy affection and exercise.<sup>30</sup> This divine fellowship reoriented the desires and dispositions of the regenerate and granted them hope in their fellowship with Christ, a hope that yielded genuine peace and happiness.<sup>31</sup>

À Brakel's depiction of the covetous heart illustrates this diagnosis. The soul that no longer rested in God imagined that happiness lay just beyond its present condition. It persuaded itself that if only it possessed the spouse, house, land, livelihood, or sum of money that another enjoyed, then it would finally be content.<sup>32</sup> Even when outward prosperity was already present, the heart continued to compare, to envy, and to reach. Desire became comparative and competitive rather than receptive. Such a person, à Brakel observed with reference to Isaiah, was like a "troubled sea" that could not rest and whose waters continually cast up mire and dirt (Isa. 57:20).<sup>33</sup> Restlessness was no longer an occasional mood; it was the settled condition of disordered desire.

Inwardly this condition was experienced as a "howling emptiness" and a greedy yearning for what was not possessed, along with a restless agitation that was not always tied to any specific object.<sup>34</sup> The heart sensed the absence of something that could satisfy, yet did not know what it was. Because desire was separated from its true end, it oscillated between vague dissatisfaction and grasping pursuit. The result was that the person could not rightly govern affections and emotions. The heart became a battleground in which sinful emotions, impulses, and fantasies contended for rule.

À Brakel's account of desire stood within a broader Augustinian and Reformed tradition that understood the Christian life as the reordering of love.<sup>35</sup> Augustine had described sin as the curving of love inward and as a disordered attachment to temporal goods that should be loved only in God. He distinguished two kinds of love: *cupiditas*, which referred to self-centered and misdirected love that turned the soul toward created things and away from God, and *caritas*, which referred to rightly ordered love that directed the soul toward God and, in God, toward

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30 À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:242.

31 À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:329.

32 À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:239–40.

33 À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:240.

34 À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:240.

35 Augustine, *Confessions* 1.1; *City of God*, 14.28, 15.22–23.

neighbor. Under Augustine's influence, Reformed theologians emphasized the centrality of the heart and the affections in their accounts of Christian life and sanctification.<sup>36</sup> Within this lineage, à Brakel shared the conviction that right doctrine and right conduct could not be separated, since faith involved the whole person, including the affections.<sup>37</sup> Similar to the English Puritans, he shared a zeal for what was often termed "heart religion," particularly in his understanding of human nature and divine grace.<sup>38</sup>

À Brakel's concerns were therefore not limited to identifying external acts of sin for moral rebuke. He attended closely to the inner movements of the heart, the inclinations of the will, and the subtle forms of delight that revealed what a person truly loved.<sup>39</sup> For him, desire for God was not exhausted by intellectual assent to doctrinal propositions, and covetousness was not exhausted by overt acts of theft or exploitation. The spiritual condition of a person was disclosed in what the heart imagined, envied, and contemplated when it was free from external constraint. For this reason, he warned against disagreeable tempers, aversion to what is good, and the quenching of the motions of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30).<sup>40</sup> The underlying problem rested not only in overt transgression but in an untamed heart that resisted God's rule.

This emphasis on the affections gave à Brakel's theology of desire the character of affective spirituality rather than abstract moralism. Desire was not simply to be negated; it was to be transformed.<sup>41</sup> The Spirit did not annihilate human longing but redirected it. Love for God displaced inordinate self-love and disordered love for created goods, while love for neighbor emerged where envy and rivalry had previously operated. In this respect, à Brakel functioned as a distinctively

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36 Ryan J. Martin, *Understanding Affections in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards: "The High Exercises of Divine Love"* (T&T Clark, 2018), 39; Hyeon Rae Jo, "Sensing the Divine: John Owen's Anthroposensitive Theology and Affective Spirituality" (PhD diss., Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2023), 30–82; Simeon Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience* (Oxford University Press, 2020). According to Zahl, affective Augustinianism constitutes a significant inheritance within the Christian tradition, emphasizing the believer's experience of the Spirit at the level of the heart.

37 À Brakel, *CRS*, 1:3–22.

38 Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, "Practical Divinity and Spirituality," in *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism*, ed. John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 197; Sam Hyeon Rae Jo, "Wilhelmus à Brakel's Understanding of Actus Fidei and Habitus Fidei: Faith as Voluntary Trust in God and Habituation in the Christian Life," *Studies in Puritanism and Piety* 3, no. 1 (2021): 81–105. Although the English Puritans and the Dutch Reformed tradition are not identical, they share substantial common ground, particularly in their emphasis on the heart-experience of faith.

39 À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:240, 293.

40 À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:240.

41 À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:237–42, 261–66.

Reformed heir to Augustinian affective spirituality, applying classical insights concerning the ordering of love within the specific early modern context of affluence, social mobility, and spiritual instability.<sup>42</sup>

Within this framework, à Brakel's extended reflections on covetousness, contentment, and self-denial formed a coherent account of desire in both its corrupted and renewed conditions. Covetousness represented the clearest expression of misdirected desire. It treated created goods as if they could secure ultimate rest, and it continually measured one's own state against that of others.<sup>43</sup> Covetous desire did not simply long for what was needed. It longed for more, for what belonged to another, or for what exceeded one's calling. As a result, the covetous heart lived in chronic dissatisfaction. It could not receive its present condition as a gift from God, since it had made imagined alternatives the condition for happiness.

This account should be distinguished from, though related to, à Brakel's treatment of envy. He discussed envy or jealousy not under the tenth commandment but under the sixth, as part of a "murderous disposition of heart."<sup>44</sup> Envy grieved when others fared well or received more honor, love, or favor than oneself; it became unfriendly toward the person who prospered and secretly delighted when that person suffered loss.<sup>45</sup> For à Brakel, envy was thus not simply the desire to possess what another has, but a hostile sorrow over another's good. It was rooted in self-love and closely allied with miserliness and ambition, but its moral logic was more directly destructive: It wished the rival diminished or removed.

Contentment, in contrast, was a grace through which the believer rested in God's fatherly providence and received present circumstances, whether prosperous or adverse, as ordered by divine wisdom.<sup>46</sup> Contentment did not imply passivity or indifference toward injustice. Instead, it signified a heart that did not ground its joy in accumulation, comparison, or control. The content soul acknowledged its creaturely dependence and confessed that sufficiency lay in God's presence

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42 À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:237–42, 263–76.

43 À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:225.

44 À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:199.

45 À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:199–200.

46 À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:379–80.

and promise rather than in possessions or social prestige. À Brakel noted that “contentment does not consist in the multitude of possessions, but in the fulfillment of desire.”<sup>47</sup> Desire therefore remained active, yet its primary direction was toward God and his kingdom, which enabled the believer to hold created goods without grasping.

Self-denial belonged with contentment as the active practice by which disordered desire was mortified and redirected.<sup>48</sup> For à Brakel, self-denial was not a psychological technique for suppressing desire but a theological act of acknowledging that one did not belong to oneself. The believer belonged to Christ and was therefore called to renounce the claim to self-ownership that lay at the root of covetous striving. Self-denial involved a willingness to relinquish goods, status, or opportunities when they conflicted with obedience, as well as a daily pattern of subordinating personal projects to the will of God.<sup>49</sup> In this movement, desire was not extinguished but purified. The self that denied itself for Christ’s sake received its life back in a new form, as a life ordered by love rather than by acquisitiveness.<sup>50</sup>

Taken together, covetousness, contentment, and self-denial displayed the negative and positive poles of à Brakel’s theology of desire. Covetousness revealed what desire became when severed from God, whereas contentment and self-denial revealed what desire became when reclaimed by grace. This triad prepared the way for a constructive account of human flourishing. Flourishing would not be defined by the maximization of options or the successful pursuit of self-chosen goals but by the Spirit’s reorientation of desire toward God in a life marked by contentment and cruciform self-giving.

It is important to distinguish à Brakel’s conception of self-denial from the radical asceticism that tempted many in the Dutch Republic. The most prominent example was the movement led by Jean de Labadie (1610–74). Driven by a perfectionist ideal of “pure love,” the Labadists advocated a spirituality that sought not merely the regulation of desire but its effective annihilation. For Labadie and his followers, genuine self-denial required stripping away natural

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47 À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:379.

48 À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:397.

49 À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:397.

50 À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:400.

human inclinations to the point of indifference regarding personal well-being. They argued that any affection for created things, including the desire for one's own salvation, compromised the purity of devotion to God.

À Brakel's personal encounters with the Labadists significantly shaped his thinking on self-denial. For a brief period he was impressed by their emphasis on the purity of the church and even considered joining their movement, which regarded the visible church as populated largely by unregenerate or false Christians. À Brakel soon recognized, however, that the church stood not upon its empirical purity but upon God's covenantal promise.<sup>51</sup> He explicitly rejected Labadist separatism in his polemical writings, including *Trouwheertige Waarschouwinge* (Faithful warning, 1683) and *Leer en leydinge der Labadisten* (Teaching and leading of the Labadists, 1685). In these works he identified their theology as a fundamental confusion between natural desire and sinful self-centeredness. For à Brakel, the self that must be denied was the sinful self, the old man in Adam, rather than the creaturely self that God created.<sup>52</sup>

By requiring believers to reject the very nature that God created, the Labadists introduced a stumbling block that hindered souls from approaching Christ and replaced the gospel with an unattainable ideal of disinterested spirituality. Unlike the Labadists, à Brakel did not call for the extinction of desire but for its sanctified regulation. The goal was not the eradication of feeling but the right ordering of affection.<sup>53</sup> Created goods were to be loved as gifts of the Father rather than as idols that secured identity. This distinction is essential for understanding the notion of "dependent flourishing," which refers to a state of ordered engagement with the world rather than withdrawal from it.

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51 Fred van Lieburg, "Warning Against the Pietists: The World of Wilhelmus à Brakel," in *Enlightened Religion: From Confessional Churches to Polite Piety in the Dutch Republic*, ed. Joke Spaans (Brill, 2019), 350–51; Hyeon Rae Jo, "Wilhelmus à Brakel's Understanding of Actus Fidei and Habitus Fidei," 89–90; Jonathan I. Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477–1806* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 669–71; Willem van Vlastuin, "Inleiding," in *Redelijke Godsdienst* (De Banier, 2016), 11–45; Graafland, Op 't Hof, and Van Lieburg, "Nadere Reformatie," 126–27; T. Bienen, *De Prediking van de Nadere Reformatie* (Bolland, 1974), 119.

52 À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:399–400.

53 À Brakel, *CRS*, 2:60–63, 669–71; 3:399–400.

## Classical Perspectives on Flourishing and Their Relation to Dependent Desire

Classical philosophy offers rich accounts of human flourishing that provide an important backdrop for interpreting à Brakel's theology of desire. Aristotle described *eudaimonia* as the highest good at which all human action aims.<sup>54</sup> *Eudaimonia* consisted in an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, carried out over a complete life, and in accordance with reason. It was not a passing feeling but a stable condition in which a person's capacities were excellently exercised. Moral virtues regulated the appetites, while intellectual virtues guided judgment, so that desire was brought into harmony with rational insight. The flourishing person was one whose desires, choices, and habits formed a coherent pattern that realized what was proper to human nature as rational and social.<sup>55</sup>

Thomas Aquinas (ca.1225–74) received and reshaped this Aristotelian account within a Christian framework. He distinguished between imperfect happiness in this life, which he associated with virtuous activity and temporal well-being, and perfect *beatitudo*, which consisted in the direct vision of God.<sup>56</sup> For Aquinas, all human beings possessed a natural desire for God as their ultimate end, even when they did not clearly recognize this desire as such.<sup>57</sup> Temporal goods such as health, honor, and wealth could be genuine goods, but they could not satisfy the deepest longing of the human heart. True fulfillment lay in participation in God's own life. At the same time, Aquinas emphasized that God ordinarily brought creatures to this end through the formation of virtues, some acquired through habituation and others infused by grace.<sup>58</sup> Flourishing therefore retained a strong moral and intellectual structure, even though it ultimately concerned supernatural participation.

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54 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols., Bollingen Series (Princeton University Press, 2009), 1095a16–1095a19. Also see Nathaniel A. Warne, "Emotions and the Development of Virtue in Puritan Thought: An Investigation of Puritan Friendship," in *Puritanism and Emotion in the Early Modern World*, ed. Alec Ryrie and Tom Schwanda (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 195–198; Warne, "Metaphysics, Emotions and the Flourishing Life," in *Emotions and Religious Dynamics*, ed. Douglas J. Davies and Nathaniel A. Warne (Ashgate, 2013), 76–77.

55 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098a16–1098a18.

56 Aquinas, *ST I-II*, q. 3, aa. 2–4; q. 4, a. 5.

57 Aquinas, *ST I-II*, q. 1, a. 8; q. 5, a. 8.

58 Aquinas, *ST I-II*, q. 63, aa. 3–4; For detailed study on Aquinas's view on infusion of gracious habit, see John V. Fesko, "Aquinas's Doctrine of Justification and Infused Habits in Reformed Soteriology," in *Aquinas Among the Protestants*, ed. Manfred Svensson and David VanDrunen (Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 249–66.

These classical accounts agree that human life is inherently teleological and that flourishing involves the ordered exercise of capacities in relation to a highest good. They also share the conviction that desire and affection must be disciplined by virtue if a person is to attain genuine happiness. A significant difference, however, emerges in how Aristotle and Aquinas construed the relationship between natural capacities and supernatural grace. Aristotle concentrated on the perfection of human nature by human virtues, while Aquinas situated this within a larger economy in which grace healed and elevated nature without destroying it.<sup>59</sup> It is precisely at this point, where flourishing is understood as participation in God rather than self-contained excellence, that à Brakel's account of what may be termed "dependent flourishing" can be fruitfully brought into conversation with these classical visions.

À Brakel's theology of desire shared important structural affinities with these classical accounts. Like Aristotle, he viewed human life as ordered toward an ultimate good, and he understood desire as inherently directed beyond the self toward that good.<sup>60</sup> Human beings were created to long for what truly satisfied them. Like Aquinas, he identified this ultimate good not with any finite object or condition but with God himself. His recurring language of communion with God and resting in God's goodness paralleled Aquinas's account of *beatitudo* as the fulfillment of the natural desire for God, although à Brakel articulated this within a distinctively Reformed doctrinal framework.<sup>61</sup> He did not place sustained emphasis on the notion of the beatific vision, yet for him God remained the believer's final hope, and the primary virtue was to glorify God by obeying the divine commandments, which he summarized as loving God and loving neighbor.<sup>62</sup>

There was also a shared concern with the ordering of desire. Aristotle described moral virtue as a settled disposition that brought the passions into accord with right reason. Aquinas developed this concern within a theological account of love's proper order (*ordo amoris*; the order of love), in which love for God and

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59 Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2.

60 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1.7; à Brakel, *CRS*, 3:31, 33, 244, 247.

61 Aquinas, *ST I-II*, q. 3, a. 8; à Brakel, *CRS*, 3:319. À Brakel's notion echoes Westminster Shorter Catechism Q1 and William Ames's definition of theology: *theologia est doctrina Deo vivendi* (theology is the doctrine of living unto God).

62 À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:31–33, 244–47, 319.

neighbor structured one's relationship to created goods.<sup>63</sup> According to Aquinas, the reordering of desire required grace.<sup>64</sup> À Brakel stood in continuity with this broader teleological tradition when he insisted that the Christian life involved the reordering of love and the regulation of the affections. His extended treatments of covetousness, contentment, and self-denial presupposed that desires could be rightly or wrongly directed, and that spiritual maturity involved a stable pattern of rightly ordered desire.<sup>65</sup>

At the same time, à Brakel's account should not be contrasted with Aquinas as though Aquinas regarded fallen human beings as equipped with largely intact powers requiring only moral refinement. Aquinas's treatise on grace was explicitly anti-Pelagian: He argued that fallen humanity could not rise from sin, avoid sin, fulfill the divine law savingly, or persevere in good without grace.<sup>66</sup>

Aquinas maintained that human nature after the fall required healing grace, and not merely elevating grace, because the will was disordered through sin and must be restored to divine justice. The difference, therefore, lies elsewhere. À Brakel's distinctively Reformed contribution was not that he affirmed the necessity of grace while Aquinas denied it, but that he gave a more searching account of the spiritual, affective, and experiential consequences of original sin.<sup>67</sup> For à Brakel, misdirected desire was not simply a weakness awaiting completion by grace; it was a manifestation of the old self's bondage, blindness, and opposition to God. The reordering of desire was therefore not primarily a project of moral self-cultivation, but the Spirit's gracious work of mortification and vivification, by which love is restored and redirected toward God.<sup>68</sup>

On the basis of the foregoing analysis, à Brakel's account of human fulfillment can be conceptually distinguished as a form of dependent flourishing. This term differentiates his Reformed vision from the autonomous ideals of modern self-actualization and clarifies his continuity and divergence from the classical teleological tradition.

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63 Aquinas, *ST II-II*, q. 26, a. 2; Augustine also argued the importance of order of love. See Augustine, *City of God*, 15.22.

64 Aquinas, *ST I-II*, q. 109, aa. 7–9. Augustine is cited in the *sed contra* of both q. 109, a. 8 and q. 109, a. 9. According to Aquinas, grace is required not only to elevate human nature to its supernatural end but also to heal and perfect fallen nature.

65 À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:215–27, 237–42, 379–413.

66 À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:4–9; see also Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2; *I-II*, q. 109, aa. 7–9.

67 À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:239.

68 À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:397–99.

Although à Brakel did not treat the beatific vision (*visio beatifica*) in the same scholastic idiom as Aquinas, God remained the believer's final hope, and the Christian life was ordered toward the enjoyment of communion with him.<sup>69</sup> Aquinas's doctrine of beatitude already exceeded the limits of unaided nature, since final beatitude consisted in the vision of the divine essence and required supernatural grace. His account therefore should not be reduced to an abstract metaphysical ascent or to the mere perfection of natural capacity. Yet à Brakel's treatment placed particular emphasis on how this eschatological end reshaped the believer's present desires. The beatific vision was not only the supernatural fulfillment of human nature, but the consummation of covenant communion with God, anticipated in faith, hope, and longing. Christians would behold God in eschatological felicity, and this future hope shaped their present life as they anticipated their inheritance in the Lord. À Brakel therefore urged believers not to "set your heart on prosperity, riches, honor, and entertainment," for these goods were "not worthy of mention in comparison with this inheritance."<sup>70</sup> Even in his discussion of blessedness, he consistently adopted a practical posture, directing attention to eschatological desire and present obedience.

Operating within a distinctly Reformed anthropology of sin and grace, à Brakel emphasized that the transition from fallen desire to spiritual flourishing was cruciform, involving not merely the elevation of human nature but the mortification of the old self and the vivification of renewed desire. Eschatological blessing provided the foundation upon which Christians endured the trials of earthly life. The natural inclinations of fallen humanity were not merely

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69 À Brakel, *CRS*, 4:365–70. À Brakel unfolded a richly Christocentric and experiential account of heavenly felicity in *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, describing "the quintessence of felicity" as to "be in the presence of God and enjoy His fellowship." He distinguished several aspects of this blessedness: Believers will be forever "with the Lord," enjoying immediate and eternal communion with him; they will behold the glorified Christ with bodily eyes, while seeing God himself "with the enlightened eyes of the understanding"; this sight issues in the enjoyment of mutual love, as the soul is encompassed and filled with God's infinite love and responds in reciprocal love; it entails perfect holiness and the full restoration of the image of God; it culminates in unspeakable joy, "peace which passeth all understanding," and an "eternal inheritance" that can neither be lost nor diminished. Throughout, à Brakel stressed that present foretastes of this vision are rare and fleeting yet stir up longing and grief over God's apparent absence, and he pressed these themes pastorally by exhorting believers to treat worldly prosperity as insignificant in comparison, to rejoice in tribulation as preparation for "a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory," and to live a holy, heaven-oriented life in anticipation of this inheritance. Furthermore, recent Reformed retrievals of the beatific vision similarly emphasize a personal, Christ-mediated, covenantal, and ethical *visio Dei* rather than a bare metaphysical intuition of the divine essence—for example, Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, "Herman Bavinck on the Beatific Vision," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 26, no. 1 (2024): 25–42; Joshua R. Farris and Ryan A. Brandt, "Ensouling the Beatific Vision: Motivating the Reformed Impulse," *Perichoresis* 15, no. 1 (2017): 67–84; and Kyle Strobel, "Jonathan Edwards' Reformed Doctrine of the Beatific Vision," in *Jonathan Edwards and Scotland*, ed. Adriaan C. Neele, Kelly van Anel, and Kenneth P. Minkema (Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press, 2011), 163–80.

70 À Brakel, *CRS*, 4:367.

inadequate; they were actively disordered. Genuine flourishing therefore required a discontinuous work of grace, a putting to death of the old self, so that the creaturely vessel could be vivified and made capable of receiving divine fullness.

For Aristotle, *eudaimonia* was largely the achievement of a self-sufficient agent who realized natural capacities through the cultivation of virtue. Aquinas significantly modified this by framing flourishing as *beatitudo*, which surpassed natural capacity and required the infusion of divine grace.<sup>71</sup> Aquinas's position therefore cannot be described as a merely natural or autonomous account of moral development. Even so, the Thomistic axiom that grace perfects nature gave his account a strong grammar of continuity between created nature and supernatural fulfillment.<sup>72</sup> À Brakel shared this conviction that grace restored human beings to their proper end, but he articulated the transition in a more overtly Augustinian and Reformed idiom: Fallen desire had to be exposed, mortified, and redirected by the Spirit before it could rest in God. His theology of desire thus retained the teleological structure of classical Christian ethics while intensifying its account of dependence, corruption, and gracious renewal.

Within the *Nadere Reformatie*'s emphasis on the antithesis between flesh and spirit, à Brakel articulated this dependence in a more explicitly penitential, affective, and pastoral idiom. For him, the fall had not merely left the vessel empty; it had curved the vessel inward. The natural desires of fallen humanity were not simply insufficient for glory; they were positively misdirected. Human dependence was therefore not merely a lack of self-sufficiency to be overcome but a permanent ontological truth. He described the human soul as an "empty vessel" that possessed no generative power to create its own happiness but was designed solely to receive content from its Creator.<sup>73</sup>

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71 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1.7 (1098a). Aristotle defines the good for man as "activity of the soul in accordance with virtue." While he acknowledges the need for external goods, the locus of flourishing remains the agent's virtuous activity.

72 Regarding Aquinas's axiom that grace does not destroy nature but perfects it (*gratia non tollit naturam, sed perficit*), see Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2. For a seminal Reformed critique arguing that the Thomistic nature-grace distinction risks underestimating the radical ethical corruption of the will, see Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Baker Academic, 2003), 1:303–306; 3:573–79.

73 À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:238, 449. À Brakel explicitly uses the metaphor of the "empty vessel" to denote that "man . . . must obtain his fulfillment from elsewhere—from a source external to himself." This underscores that dependence is not a defect but the creature's proper design.

Flourishing, therefore, did not arise simply from the elevation of intrinsic potential, but through the Spirit's mortifying and vivifying work, by which fallen desire was exposed, reordered, and directed toward God. It emerged through dependent participation in God's goodness, requiring the renunciation of sinful inclinations that competed for the heart's ultimate allegiance. À Brakel wrote: "Separate yourself from all that you are permitted to separate yourself from, so that the Lord alone will have your heart."<sup>74</sup>

This dependent flourishing operated on two levels. First, it was ontologically receptive. In contrast to the modern anxiety that one must secure experiences to validate existence, à Brakel argued that human fullness was derivative. The creature flourished when it ceased to act as a self-contained source of good and acknowledged that life was received rather than generated.<sup>75</sup> Second, it was correctively discontinuous. Because of the depth of human corruption, flourishing could not be attained through the refinement of natural desires. It required the mortification of the old nature.<sup>76</sup> Self-denial was therefore not a negation of flourishing but its precondition. Dependent flourishing thus offered an alternative to the fragility of the modern autonomous self. By relocating the center of gravity from individual achievement to God's fatherly care, à Brakel described a form of life in which desire was properly ordered.

Dependent flourishing had, for à Brakel, a distinctly Trinitarian and covenantal structure. The Spirit restored the divine image in the believer so that the affections were gradually reordered toward God in love, reverence, and obedience.<sup>77</sup> Contentment was not a stoic *apatheia*, the suppression of desire to attain inner equilibrium, but a Spirit-worked repose in the Father's providence. Similarly, self-denial did not negate the self but freed it from disordered cravings that displaced the love of God and neighbor. Human flourishing therefore consisted in a graced capacity to live as a dependent child before the Father, united to Christ and animated by the Spirit within the concrete conditions of everyday economic and social life.

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<sup>74</sup> À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:275.

<sup>75</sup> À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:300–305, 309, 313, 320–21, 372, 384, 395, 399.

<sup>76</sup> À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:20–22, 398.

<sup>77</sup> À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:379–413.

Self-denial played a central role in this vision of dependent flourishing. In the previous section it appeared as one element within à Brakel's broader theology of desire, alongside covetousness and contentment. It can now be seen more fully as the posture that corresponded to dependent flourishing. À Brakel identified self-denial as a Christian virtue and argued that "the moving cause of self-denial is the Lord, not the man himself."<sup>78</sup> His account of self-denial therefore illuminated the extent to which human flourishing depended upon God. To deny oneself was to acknowledge in practice that one did not possess final authority over one's life and that identity and destiny were received from Christ. This denial was not a negation of the self, erasing personality or suppressing all desire, but a renunciation of the claim to self-ownership that lay at the heart of covetous striving.

In this respect, self-denial functioned as a critical counterpart to modern ideals of autonomy and self-actualization. Contemporary accounts of flourishing often presupposed that the good life consisted in the free realization of personal projects, constrained only by the equal liberty of others.<sup>79</sup> Desire was treated as something to be clarified and pursued rather than discerned, judged, and redirected. À Brakel's account challenged this assumption by asserting that unexamined desire was prone to misdirection and that genuine flourishing might require the refusal of certain attractive possibilities. Self-denial became the form that love took when obedience to God and concern for neighbor conflicted with self-centered ambition.

At the same time, self-denial was not merely negative. It opened the way to a richer life by mortifying sinful dispositions, particularly selfishness. When believers denied themselves, they were freed from the comparative impulses and anxious strategies through which they attempted to secure worth through accumulation or recognition. They became able to receive their vocation, relationships, and possessions as gifts to be used in love rather than as instruments

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<sup>78</sup> À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:398.

<sup>79</sup> For a comprehensive genealogy of the modern identity, see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Harvard University Press, 1989), where Taylor traces the historical development of "expressive individualism" and the ethic of authenticity that underpin contemporary self-understanding; for a critique of the loss of teleology in post-Enlightenment moral discourse, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), who argues that the modern self has become a fragmented emotivist subject detached from tradition; and for a sociological analysis of human moral nature, see Christian Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2009), who contends that all human beings, including those prioritizing autonomy, inevitably live within specific moral orders and sacred narratives.

of self-advancement. Flourishing through self-denial was therefore cruciform in shape. It participated in the pattern of Christ's life, in which relinquishment and obedience constituted the means through which life was found.

## Self-Denial and the Regulation of Desire

Having clarified the theological structure of dependent flourishing, it remains to consider how self-denial functioned practically in the regulation of desire, especially within the ordinary economic and social pressures of early modern Dutch life. À Brakel's theology of desire culminated in a call to regulate the affections and inclinations of the heart. If desire was a created good that had been corrupted by sin, and if grace reordered love, then the Christian life necessarily involved vigilant attention to the inner movements of the soul. In his view, believers were responsible not only for avoiding outward acts of covetousness but also for resisting subtle forms of discontent, fantasy, and comparison that revealed an undisciplined heart.<sup>80</sup>

In this context, self-denial was inseparable from the ongoing discipline of the affections. It referred to the habitual refusal of desires that contradicted obedience to God and love for neighbor, and the corresponding affirmation of desires shaped by the Spirit's work. This regulation was not merely negative. It presupposed that the heart was always active and that affections would inevitably be directed toward some object. The fundamental question concerned whether these affections were governed by the Spirit or remained under the influence of the old nature.

Practices such as self-examination, meditation on Scripture, and prayerful reflection functioned as means through which believers learned to discern the difference between spiritual and carnal movements of the heart. À Brakel's warnings against disagreeable tempers, resentful attitudes, and vain imaginings underscored his conviction that seemingly minor interior motions gradually shaped a person's basic disposition toward God. Regulating desire was therefore not an attempt to suppress emotion, but a call to spiritual discernment, ensuring that the believer cultivated desires that fostered dependent flourishing rather than desires that deepened restlessness.

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80 À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:263–64.

Because desire formed an integral part of human nature as created by God, its regulation could not consist in simple suppression. À Brakel's account implied that the Spirit's work did not annihilate longing but reoriented it.<sup>81</sup> When the heart learned contentment in God's providence, it became capable of desiring created goods in a fitting manner, receiving them as gifts rather than treating them as sources of identity.

À Brakel's treatment of self-denial was not confined to abstract moral principles. As a pastor, he consistently directed his readers to examine the concrete patterns of their daily life, particularly in relation to money, possessions, and social status. In his exposition of the tenth commandment and of contentment, he did not limit himself to condemning covetousness in general terms. He urged his audience to observe their houses, wardrobes, and financial practices and to consider what these revealed about the state of their hearts.<sup>82</sup> The concern was not simply whether goods had been obtained lawfully, but whether the heart had become agitated by imagined alternatives or had rested content with the portion given by God.<sup>83</sup>

This close examination of household practices served as an exercise in mortifying covetousness and cultivating gratitude. By directing attention to the relationships between desire, acquisition, and imagination, à Brakel showed that self-denial did not consist solely in dramatic acts of renunciation. It required a disciplined posture of receiving one's circumstances with gratitude and resisting the persistent tendency to imagine fulfillment in alternative possessions, opportunities, or forms of security.

Within this framework, certain desires remained entirely appropriate, provided they were ordered toward love for God and neighbor. Believers could desire to grow in wisdom, to serve their communities, to provide for their families, and to exercise their skills faithfully within their vocations.<sup>84</sup> Self-denial did not exclude such desires. Instead, it shaped the manner in which they were held and pursued.

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<sup>81</sup> À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:238.

<sup>82</sup> À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:237–51, 379–82, 397–403.

<sup>83</sup> À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:240.

<sup>84</sup> À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:399–400.

It reminded Christians that they acted as stewards rather than owners and that the deepest form of joy was found not in the success of personal projects but in a life directed by obedience.

Ordered desire also involved a reconfiguration of how loss and gain were evaluated. In cultures that equate flourishing with an ever-expanding range of options, relinquishing an opportunity, accepting limitation, or refusing advancement often appears as failure. Within such a framework, the good life is measured by acquisition: more possessions, more experiences, more security, more honor, and more visible achievement. Self-denial can only appear as diminishment, while contentment may be misread as passivity or lack of ambition.

For à Brakel, however, desires surrendered for the sake of obedience or for the good of others were not wasted. They belonged to a different economy of value in which conformity to Christ, rather than accumulation, constituted the measure of flourishing. What appeared outwardly as loss could be spiritual gain if it trained the heart to rest in God rather than in created goods. Conversely, what appeared outwardly as gain could become spiritually destructive if it intensified self-love, comparison, anxiety, or dependence on wealth. Dependent flourishing therefore required not only new desires but a transformed metric of value. The renewed heart learned to measure gain by communion with God, obedience to his will, likeness to Christ, and usefulness to others. Contentment and self-denial were thus not merely restraints on desire; they were forms of spiritual perception by which believers learned to discern the difference between apparent prosperity and true blessedness.

The sphere of finance and economic life provided a primary context in which à Brakel's account of covetousness, contentment, and self-denial became practically operative. During the Dutch Golden Age, commercial expansion and the proliferation of luxury goods created distinct opportunities for temptation, distraction, and spiritual anxiety. In a parallel manner, contemporary consumer capitalism pressures individuals to construct identity through accumulation, investment, and visible achievement. Economic activity thus becomes a setting in which disordered desire readily takes root.

À Brakel's theological framework suggested that Christian participation in financial and vocational life should be governed by contentment and a posture of self-denial rather than by relentless pursuit of maximized gain. Believers

could rightly earn, save, and invest. Reformed theology affirmed diligence, stewardship, and prudent labor. Yet these practices were to be undertaken by those whose sufficiency rested in God. His pastoral writings made this clear:

Now turn to yourself and examine yourself in light of the virtues and vices mentioned above. How do you fare? Open your containers and closets, and observe your money, clothing, home decorations, as well as your homes, orchards, and fields, and then answer this question: How did you acquire all these? If you perceive that you have not acquired them lawfully, restore that which you have obtained in an evil manner, for otherwise you are not permitted to pray (Isa. 1:16–17; 1 John 3:20).<sup>85</sup>

This posture relativized the pressure to match the accomplishments of others and exposed the spiritual danger of treating economic life as a measure of personal worth. For à Brakel, the examination of financial motives formed part of Christian moral formation. His theology of desire did not remain theoretical. It unfolded through concrete guidance that linked doctrine with practice, illustrating the fundamentally practical character of Reformed theology.

More fundamentally, financial sufficiency rested not in the quantity of possessions but in the believer's relation to God as giver.<sup>86</sup> This posture also transformed ownership into stewardship. Because the Christian prays not merely "Give me" but "Give us," à Brakel argued that material provision must be understood in relation to the needs of others and practiced through generosity.<sup>87</sup> The recipient has received his bounty of goods "as a steward to disperse it upon command," so that when another's need becomes known, compassion should be stirred and "your hand must be ready to give."<sup>88</sup> Economic life thus became a concrete arena for the reordering of desire. The believer was not called to despise God's blessings but to encounter them rightly: with gratitude toward

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<sup>85</sup> À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:224.

<sup>86</sup> À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:553–54.

<sup>87</sup> À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:551–52.

<sup>88</sup> À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:552.

God, restraint toward the self, and generosity toward the neighbor. He taught that finances and vocation were domains in which Christians learned to confess that what they possessed was not finally their own.<sup>89</sup>

À Brakel encouraged practices such as limiting lifestyle expansion, resisting status-driven consumption, and giving generously. These were not therapeutic techniques for self-optimization but expressions of trust in divine providence and concern for neighbor. He warned that practices such as participation in lotteries arose from discontent and a desire to become rich and that such impulses led to harmful spiritual consequences.<sup>90</sup> These admonitions reflected his conviction that trust in the Lord should govern every sphere of life.

This orientation revealed the contours of dependent flourishing. For à Brakel, success was not primarily measured by upward mobility or financial expansion, but by faithfulness within one's God-given station. This perspective did not suppress ambition, but it subjected ambition to the criteria of love, obedience, and vocational integrity. Self-denial therefore could require declining opportunities that promised increased income or prestige when such gains would compromise worship, family responsibilities, or ethical faithfulness. Economic life thus became not a domain of self-assertion but a sphere in which creaturely dependence and spiritual maturity were cultivated.

À Brakel's vision of flourishing through self-denial is best understood within the classical Reformed pattern of mortification and vivification. Mortification referred to the putting to death of sinful habits and desires, while vivification referred to the enlivening of new affections and obedience by the Spirit.<sup>91</sup> These were not discrete stages but complementary aspects of the same work of grace. As covetousness was confronted and weakened, space was created for contentment and generosity. As fantasies of comparison or self-exaltation were refused, the heart became more receptive to joy in God and to the good of others.

From this perspective, self-denial was not an arbitrary restriction imposed by God, nor a form of spiritual austerity for its own sake. It functioned as the necessary form that love assumed in a world marked by disordered desire. To

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<sup>89</sup> À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:553–54.

<sup>90</sup> À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:127.

<sup>91</sup> À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:6, 11, 397–98.

deny oneself for Christ's sake was to consent to the Spirit's work of mortifying patterns of desire that disrupted peace, harmed community, and obscured the glory of God. At the same time, it meant receiving a new mode of life in which the believer experienced, in part, the rest and delight associated with communion with God.

The paradox of flourishing through self-denial can therefore be resolved within the framework of dependent flourishing. When believers acknowledged that they did not belong to themselves but to Christ, they were liberated from the burdensome project of securing worth through acquisition, achievement, or comparison. The regulation of desire and the cultivation of contentment did not reduce the self to passivity. Rather, they formed a distinctive mode of agency in which action proceeded from love and trust rather than anxiety or competitive striving. In this way, à Brakel's early modern account of desire offered a theologically coherent alternative to contemporary visions of the good life shaped by late-modern forms of desire and cultural comparison.

Within this framework, à Brakel's call to self-denial can be interpreted as a particular instantiation of the Puritan theme of mortification and vivification. Like John Owen (1616–83) and his English contemporaries, he argued that the Spirit led believers to put to death the “evil disposition of soul and body” and to walk in newness of life.<sup>92</sup> Mortification and vivification occurred through the believer's dependence on the Lord as the heart was increasingly inclined to trust in God. À Brakel wrote: “The least of them has some knowledge of the Lord, and not only knows that it is his duty to glorify the Lord, but already has a desire for and an inclination toward this. They also manifest to some degree that the Spirit of Christ is in them and their good works begin to manifest themselves, even if this is as yet in a very small measure.”<sup>93</sup>

À Brakel's distinctive contribution lay in his effort to embed this dynamic within the ordinary pressures of early modern commercial society. The temptations associated with a fashionable wardrobe, a larger house, a more prestigious office, or a more profitable trade served as concrete arenas in which mortification

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92 On mortification and vivification as a basic pattern of repentance and sanctification in Reformed and Puritan theology, see à Brakel, *CRS*, 3:11–16; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Westminster John Knox, 1960), 3.3.8–10; *Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord's Day 33, Q&A 88–90; John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, 16 vols., ed. William H. Goold (Banner of Truth, 1965), 6:1–86.

93 À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:261.

and vivification were enacted. By urging Christians to examine and renounce disordered expectations in these specific domains, he demonstrated that mortification was not an abstract internal struggle but a re-patterning of economic and social life in obedience to God.

## **Conclusion: The Paradox of Cruciform Flourishing**

This study began by juxtaposing two apparently disparate contexts: the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, characterized by the “embarrassment of riches,” and the twenty-first-century digital economy, shaped by the anxiety of perceived insufficiency. Despite the historical distance, both contexts revealed a similar spiritual condition: a restless human heart seeking infinite fulfillment in finite goods. By retrieving the theology of Wilhelmus à Brakel, this article has argued that the Reformed tradition offers a distinct account of human flourishing that challenges the autonomous assumptions of late modernity.

The central contribution of this inquiry is the concept of dependent flourishing. In critical engagement with the teleological visions of Aristotle and Aquinas, à Brakel’s thought demonstrated that true flourishing is not the achievement of a self-sufficient agent perfecting natural capacities but the receptive posture of a creature resting in divine providence. For him, the human soul was an “empty vessel” that was filled not through grasping but through grace. This reframed the moral imagination of the good life, emphasizing participatory union with God rather than accumulation, optimization, or self-construction.

Consequently, self-denial appeared not as a negation of life but as the necessary condition for its proper enjoyment. In an age shaped by competitive desires and incessant comparison, à Brakel’s call to mortify covetousness functioned as a call to freedom. It liberated the self from the pressures of self-validation and redirected desire toward the goodness of God. Through the Spirit’s work of vivification, the believer became able to receive work, relationships, and material goods as gifts rather than as verdicts on personal value.

In the end, à Brakel offered a vision of cruciform flourishing. It was a pattern of life in which affirmation emerged through renunciation and in which the path to fulfillment passed through the discipline of desire. For contemporary Christian theology, operating within a culture that commercializes aspiration and monetizes anxiety, à Brakel’s early modern perspective offers a timely corrective. It locates rest not in further acquisition or expanded experience, but in the relinquishment

of self-ownership. In giving up the attempt to secure life on one's own terms, the believer discovers the only flourishing capable of satisfying the restless human heart.

Beyond these theological insights, the study also contributes to broader interdisciplinary conversations about human desire, well-being, and the formation of the self. By retrieving à Brakel's affective theology of desire, the article shows that Reformed spirituality can contribute to contemporary accounts of human flourishing by interpreting desire not merely as preference or aspiration, but as a morally and spiritually formed orientation toward an ultimate good. His account of dependent flourishing illuminates how desire is shaped not merely by individual choice but by the practices, communities, and liturgies that form the moral imagination. In this respect, the study advances philosophical and theological accounts of agency by showing how creaturely dependence, rather than autonomous self-assertion, serves as the ground of genuine well-being.

Moreover, the constructive retrieval of à Brakel's spirituality underscores the ongoing pastoral significance of ordered desire. His emphasis on self-denial, contentment, and the regulation of the affections offers the church a practical grammar for resisting the pathologies of late-modern consumer culture, in which persons are habituated to understand their worth through comparison, acquisition, and self-optimization. The dynamics of mortification and vivification thus provide not only a theological anthropology but also a pastoral strategy for cultivating resilient, non-anxious communities capable of resisting the cultural forces that seek to colonize human desire.

Seen in this light, à Brakel's theology of desire offers both a historical resource and a contemporary summons. It calls Christian communities to reimagine flourishing as cruciform and dependent rather than competitive and self-constructed. By doing so, it contributes to theology, philosophy, and pastoral practice alike, illuminating a vision of human life in which the restless heart finds its rest not by mastering desire but by receiving its fulfillment from the God who graciously reorders it.

Submitted: March 16, 2026 EDT. Accepted: June 10, 2026 EDT. Published: July 31, 2026 EDT.