

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH III: 6-8

(Readings: 1 Pet.1:1-12; 2:4-10; 2 Pet.1:3-11)

Why God's Plan Makes The Difference In You

We ended looking at Article's 3 till 5 with that phrase "in Christ", because it is in Christ that we saw why God has planned all this. It is through faith in His Son that we see this is all for His glory. This is the good news. In those great words of Ephesians 1, the verses 5 and 6, "In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will - to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves."

Now we turn to see the process behind all this. A process we can compare to our everyday food - food that God gives to you. The way He gives it to you, though, involves some quite different methods and forces at work. There must be sunshine and rain, harvest and distribution. Without any of these things you won't end up getting fed.

It's the same way with our being saved. Article 6 says, "As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath He, by the eternal and most free purpose of His will, foreordained all the means thereunto." In the words of the first aspect to this text, **THIS TEACHING TELLS US HOW GOD GRACIOUSLY WORKS ELECTION.**

This Teaching Tells Us How God Graciously Works Election

I'm sure you've heard the expression, "the end justifies the means." In other words, because you are aiming for something you will tie in everything else to help fulfil that purpose.

Now, often this phrase is used to excuse some very bad ethical practices. But there could be nothing wrong with the Lord's end for us - predestination. Because this involves us being called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved.

The apostle Peter spoke clearly to this. In his first letter chapter 1, verse 2, he says that you "have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father," but it's through "the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood."

We actually are worshipping and serving the Lord as much as we can not because there is no election, but because there is. That's why in His second letter chapter 1, verse 10, Peter exhorts us, "be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure."

Sometimes we Calvinists are been labelled as 'fatalists'. So we're put in the same camp as Muslims who believe that things are going to happen the way they are going to happen no matter what. With this philosophy you might as well do what you want to do since it won't make any difference anyway.

Leonard Coppes illustrates this by what happened once to one of his College Professors. For that Professor was once on a trip through the Middle East. And on one occasion his taxi-cab driver was a Muslim. Even though the streets were very crowded and very narrow that driver raced at break-neck speed. The ride was nerve shattering with people being missed by centimetres. And when the Professor asked the driver to slow down, he was told, "Whatever Allah wills will happen regardless of the way I drive." So personal responsibility is completely disregarded.

How further away from predestination could that be! For God's process very much involves us! He is the personal God! In fact, Biblical teaching has to declare that God Himself and all His

works are in perfect harmony. When we are truly loving Him, we are fulfilling His Will. Then we are doing what He has predestined us for.

And then we would not do anything that could in any way endanger our calling. Whether by what we believe or how we live. We know we have to make our calling and election sure!

Now, for most of Article 6 there has been no disagreement within the reformed-presbyterian world. When it came to the last sentence, however, there has been a distinct difference over the years - a difference that has led to some misunderstanding, also between continental and British Calvinists.

The reason for this difference was represented at the Westminster Assembly by a small group of Englishmen who were influenced by the teaching of Moses Amyraut and John Cameron at Saumur in France. This Saumur theology, called Amyraldism, modified Calvinism by teaching that Christ died for the saved absolutely and for the lost conditionally, in case they should believe. You can see why anyone holding this view today is known as a 4½ point Calvinist!

Well, this position received no endorsement in the Westminster Confession. This last sentence of Article 6 and the 8th Article of Chapter 8 are very clearly opposed to their view.

But getting short shrift here, its proponents tried to reinvent history and argue that before this their view was quite acceptable. For instance, John Cameron held that the Synod of Dort did not narrowly define things as the Westminster was doing here in Article 6.

This is quite untenable. This is the rewriting of history that twists it to suit your view. And to a degree it even worked for them. One author I referred to seems to accept their perspective on history and uses it to show how the Westminster is better than what came before!

While the Westminster Confession is certainly the rose of the Reformation it is by no means the only flower. A simple looking back over less than a hundred years before the Confession was written showed that quite clearly. A history they knew very well then. For everyone there would have been fully aware of John Calvin's dispute with Jerome Bolsec.

So, who was Bolsec? And what was the issue? Well, Bolsec, like Calvin, was a Frenchman, who came to Geneva in 1550. He had been in the priesthood, like so many others - in his case as a Carmelite monk. Within a short time, though, he began to dispute Calvin's teaching on predestination, especially reprobation. He declared, instead, that everyone is able to choose salvation. He said that the reason why some received it and others rejected it lies in each man's freewill. At the same time he was right against any kind of merit you could earn.

This, in the eyes of John Calvin, was a logical contradiction and absurdity. He quite consistently pointed out that, "If some were elected, it surely follows that those who come to Christ are drawn by the Father through the peculiar operation of the Holy Spirit on the elect. It follows either that all must be indiscriminately elected, or that the cause of election lies in each man's merit."

Later the dispute came to a head when Bolsec verbally attacked one of the preachers, a John de St. Andre. St. Andre was preaching on John 8 verse 47. There the Lord Jesus says, "He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God."

It's clear that this text teaches sovereign reprobation. It says that the Jews aren't believing because God hasn't chosen them to be His people. St. Andre understood the text. He explained it to mean that those who are not elect will never believe God's words. Instead, they'll oppose God until they die because God gives His grace only to the elect.

Bolsec stood up and harangued the preacher. He shouted out his view. And on top of that he heaped verbal abuse upon the clergy of Geneva and warned those there to reject this false teaching.

What Bolsec didn't know was that, near the beginning of his outburst, Calvin had walked in and was standing in the doorway listening to everything Bolsec said. Calvin waited until he had said his piece. Then he stepped forward and began an address to the congregation in which he refuted every argument of Bolsec with Scripture. He proved with many quotes, from memory, the truth of sovereign predestination. He comprehensively showed that his teaching was no innovation but completely consistent with the great Church Father Augustine.

Beza, another pastor, was also there. He later wrote that so thorough was Calvin's address that "all felt exceedingly ashamed for the brazen-faced monk, except for the monk himself."

In the end Bolsec ended up in the Roman Catholic Church. And quite rightly so, for his doctrine was Arminian not Calvinist - he was Pelagian not Augustinian.

This Teaching Tells Us How God Sovereignly Directs Reprobation

In this way, congregation, we have already moved into our second aspect to this text. For THIS TEACHING TELLS US HOW GOD SOVEREIGNLY DIRECTS REPROBATION.

Here we come to Article 7. This takes up where the last sentence of Article 6 left off, because outside of the elect there are the reprobate. Outside of the saved there are the lost. And here the focus turns quite definitely on them.

Article 7 deals with this in two ways. First of all it says that God passes by the lost. Why does he pass them by? Could it be on account of their sin? Then everyone would be passed by, wouldn't they? The elect are sinners, too.

The only reason why God passes the lost by is because God is sovereign. God has His own reasons but it's nothing to do with anything in the creature. The apostle Paul in Romans 9 verse 18 says after telling of God's sovereignty in the case of Jacob and Esau, "Therefore God has mercy on whom he want to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden."

We read of how another apostle, Peter, describes it in his first letter. In the second chapter and verse 8, he writes about the reprobate, "They stumble because they disobey the message - which is also what they were destined for."

So it's nothing in any of us that makes the difference for our eternal destination. It lies completely with God and He keeps it out of our sight. As Article 7 says, "He extendeth or withholdeth mercy as He pleaseth, for the glory of His sovereign power."

The second way Article 7 deal with the reprobate is by saying that God has determined to treat those He does pass by with strict justice. So while sin has got nothing to do with God's passing by the reprobate, it is the reason for the damnation they receive. As Paul said in Ephesians 5 verse 6, after enumerating a whole list of sins, "Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient."

For while the sins mentioned are not the reason why some are left in their sin, the sin in which they are left, however, brings the wrath of God on them. Only the deserving go to hell.

Some Christians at this point accuse us of being logical and not biblical. And yet what does Scripture say? It is quite clear about unconditional election. They are the ones who try to force an unbiblical logic.

Instead, we should simply let Scripture stand as it is. True, Jesus wept over Jerusalem. But that could not stop the destruction of that city so soon afterward.

Robert Dabney uses an analogy from the life of George Washington. A certain Major Andre had threatened the safety of the young American Republic through “rash and unfortunate” treasonous acts. Washington had no choice but to sign that man’s death warrant.

At the same time Washington was really cut up about it. He hated to do it. And while some may say that he could have done otherwise if he really felt for that man, he had no choice. Otherwise he wouldn’t have uttered the oaths he did when he became President. In his office he had to do what was wise and just.

So while God loves the world with a deep compassion that desires their salvation yet He has also chosen, from before the foundation of the world, those whom He will save from sin. In the words of John Piper, “Election is the good news that salvation is not only a sincere offer made to all, but a sure effect in the life of the elect and a transformation of faith produced by the power of God’s grace.”

For us this means that we must treat every one we meet as those who could be called. Only God knows the names of those who are and aren’t elected. But He has told us to tell and show that all men must be saved.

You will meet many arguments on this point. People will say that this God is so unfair. “How can you reconcile this with a loving God?” they say.

But those questions actually definitively prove the point! For what kind of reaction should we expect from a doctrine which strongly denies the supreme claim of sinful man - that claim to be “as god”. Because that’s what there is in each one of us. We have to be exposed for what we are, but that needs to be done in the right way. We need to speak “the truth in love”, to use Paul’s words in Ephesians 4:15.

This is why the Confession next lays before us the 8th Article of Chapter 3 on ‘God’s Eternal Decree’. It begins, “The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care.”

But the fear of this doctrine offending anyone cannot be an excuse for not teaching it. In fact, isn’t it the very gospel itself the ‘skandalon’? Because this Greek word was used by Paul to show the kind of effect preaching Christ would have. It’s a word which means “stumbling block.” People can’t get over it. At least, not without falling anyway!

I mean, doesn’t the good news about Jesus upset people? Because this is the message that says they haven’t got it. And our age, like any other age, doesn’t like to be told that.

But could you be without this gospel? And having been called, justified and adopted, don’t you want to be sanctified, too? This is why the words of the third aspect to our text says, **THIS TEACHING TELLS US HOW GOD WONDERFULLY ASSURES SALVATION.**

This Teaching Tells Us How God Wonderfully Assures Salvation

After the warning to treat this doctrine carefully at its beginning, notice how Article 8 goes on. For we confess there that preaching and teaching election means that we, “attending the will of

God revealed in His Word, and yielding obedience thereunto, may, from the certainty of [our] effectual vocation, be assured of [our] eternal election.”

Now, if any generation in the history of the Christian church needed true assurance it must be ours! Because of any generation in the history of the church ours is the most self-centred. We'll look after ourselves first of all.

A Mission's Director for a Reformed-Presbyterian denomination in North America once spoke about the state of American missionary work after 9/11. He said they just cannot support the overseas mission work they once did. This is why there has been a drastic cut back in missions in the last decade. The giving has just fallen right away.

Why? Well, where's that money going now? It's all being used to give them their own sense of security. Christians honestly think today that if they don't look after themselves nobody else well. That makes us so much different than so many generations before us!

The failure to teach this doctrine is part of that picture. When you've reduced God down to a series of felt-needs and wants, He's there for you - not the other way round!

George Mueller realised this, after being convicted of the vital importance of this teaching. He wrote, “As to the effect which my belief in these doctrines had on me, I am constrained to state for God's glory, that though I am still exceedingly weak, and by no means so dead to the lusts of the flesh, and the lusts of the eyes, and the pride of life, as I might be, and as I ought to be, yet, by the grace of God, I have walked more closely with Him since that period. My life has not been so variable, and I may say that I have lived much more for God than before.”

That was a generation that did great things for God! That was a time when the Church impacted on English society in such a way that the close threat of a revolution as that in France was completely taken away. That was an age when the whole gospel was proclaimed. They proved the truth of 2nd Peter 1 verse 10 that by doing the things of God they were able to keep on going. Much as Christian preachers today may talk about experiencing God, much as they may claim miracles and healings and all kinds of signs and wonders, that's how much they fail to humble themselves under mighty God. For it's when they confess they don't have anything, when they - and we - empty ourselves of all our pride, that is when God does great things.

Preaching this doctrine helps do that. And believing it makes so much difference. As the ‘Thirty-Nine Articles’ puts it, “the godly consideration of Predestination, and our Election in Christ, is full of sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort to godly persons.”

You think about that. Christ's Spirit working in you means that more and more you're looking up to heaven because the things of this earth matter less and less. And so it must be that what are to the earthly the most clouded and dim of all doctrines becomes to the heavenly that which is the most clearest and bright.

This is what Paul sang in his great doxology at the end of Romans 11. As we hear in verse 33 there, “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!”

But perhaps I've missed something. While you've appreciated all this about election, you're still wondering if you're one of God's elect.

Maybe this story from Rousseau will help. He had quite some anxiety about being one of the elect. So he came up with a way to test whether he was one of God's elect or not. This test

involved throwing an apple at a tree. If he missed he was doomed to be lost. If he hit the tree, he was of the elect.

Well, you wondering if he hit that tree, aren't you? Of course he did! It was the biggest tree he could find!

However, the thing that mattered most of all for Rousseau - and for any of us - is that the question is being asked. We honestly realise how far short of God we are. And we do honestly wonder - even to the point of doubting.

Which is exactly why God gives us this doctrine!