

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH V: 1

(Reading: Acts 17:16-34)

When God's Creating Becomes His Sustaining

In an article describing the evils of abortions, a Christian writer described the deaths of those unborn babies as “untimely” and “premature”. So he wrote that these children had died way before they ought to have died, and that they should have lived for a lot longer. “The world was robbed of their talents,” he said.

We feel with him, don't we? This is a terrible sin. It disfigures God's image.

One mature believer begged to differ with him, though. She responded by saying that nothing in this world is untimely or premature. She said everything happens in God's timetable - whether for good or bad. It's all according to the way that He planned it!

So there is man's responsibility. We must love life. But there's also God's sovereignty. Nothing happens outside of His control.

You see, God's creating of all things cannot help but make us see His sustaining of all things. His bringing things into existence must come with His keeping them in existence. And so the first point in considering Article 1 on God's Providence is that **GOD DOESN'T AT ALL STOP THERE.**

God Doesn't At All Stop There

So there's no gradual transition here. There's no bridge from one to the other or some other kind of thing in-between. Just as the creatures, because they are creatures, cannot come out of themselves, so too they cannot for a moment exist through themselves. It's no wonder then that the first Article of the Westminster's Chapter 5 begins, “God the great Creator,” because it fits right in. In fact, providence is so much a part of creation, they are hand-in-hand.

Hebrews 1 verse 3 says, “The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.” The same Word who had brought all things into being. The Word Genesis 1 tells about for each day of God's creating. “And God said,” we read nine times there. The very moment the world was called into being by the creative act of God it came under the sphere of God's providence.

And it's the denial of this in church history which has led into some of its most difficult times with heresy, because to rob God of even one part of what is rightfully His in one part of life is to take away from the whole of what He is. The heresy of ‘Deism’ is an example of this.

You might know the saying that when it rains in the world it leaks in church. Well, in the 17th and 18th centuries the storm was so bad in the world, the influence of the Enlightenment began to pour into the church!

The ‘Enlightenment’ wasn't actually very enlightening at all. Because it threw the light on mankind and what he could do, it took so much away from the Lord. They believed that in the new age they were living, men were enlightened by the use of their reason, and were moving away from superstition. With reason they believed there wasn't anything they couldn't hope to accomplish, and ‘Deism’ was its religious expression.

While they believed in God, they saw Him as simply the great Architect of the universe. Virtue was his true service. After death virtue was to be rewarded and sin punished. So it is all up to what man does!

Deism said that God governed through an unchangeable law which He had created. He wound up the world like some huge clock and just let it go. It left no room for miracles, the incarnation, or the Trinity. Those things weren't rational!

This is far from the God of Scripture. This is not the One of whom King Nebuchadnezzar confesses in Daniel 4 verse 35, "He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth." You see, there is stability and regularity in creation because God's commands maintain that stability and regularity.

But you can see the influence of the enlightenment still strongly today. Our whole culture is influenced by the belief that stability and regularity is in the creation itself. The universe is thought to operate according to 'laws' which are built into the structure of creation and so are unchangeable. They even call her "Mother Nature".

Noel Weeks illustrates the difference between the Biblical view and this common non-Christian position. He says, "Suppose a soldier were marching to and fro on sentry duty. The point at which he turned and marched back was determined by his commanding officer. The regularity of the sentry's beat and his turning points are determined by the command of his officer.

Suppose somebody were to watch the soldier and ignore the commanding officer. He could then say that there is a 'law' inherent in the soldier that he will march so many paces and then turn. Which is the real law governing that soldier? Is it the command of the officer or the description of his march given by the observer?

Following God's question to Job, in the book of Job chapter 38 verse 34, we can answer that question very easily. If the commander says, 'about turn', then the soldier will turn. If the observer says, 'He marches twenty paces and then turns', it will not make the soldier turn.

You see, the regularity of creation is not inherent in itself. It's because the Lord's command brought it into being and it's the Lord's command which keeps it going. As long as the commander is ordering his servants to do what they have always done, it may not seem to make much difference whether the command was inherent in creation or is maintained by God's commands.

However, there is a point where it makes a great difference. That's when God, as a sign of His power and authority, gives an unusual command. And we usually call those 'miracles'.

Like so many other heresies this is nothing new. It wasn't even new in the 18th century. The apostle Peter deals with such a false teaching in his second letter. In chapter 3, the verses 1 till 13, we find there are those who argue against any intervention by God in history. They are quoted in verse 4 as saying, "Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation."

So how does Peter answer them? In verse 5 he says, "But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and with water. And then he writes, "By water also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed."

So there was a command of God which caused the flood. And in the same way, Peter goes on in verse 7, there will be a day when God will command destruction by another way - by fire!

You can begin to see where Deism leads to. Conversions are cut right out. In fact, what do you think they would say conversions actually are?

They say conversions are normal psychological processes similar to those that produce any other change of mind. Here is one story which shows this: David Hume, one of the Enlightenment's major advocates, would try and prove this when he went to watch George Whitefield preaching. Now, there would be thousands and thousands in that audience out in the open air. Positioning himself on the very outer edge of the crowd he noted the emotional reactions around him. One lady swooned and became quite moved. Hume was puzzled. Because he couldn't hear a word of what Whitefield was saying.

So he asked that lady why she was so struck. To which she replied, "Oh, dear Sir, it was the way Mr Whitefield moved his head!"

Well, we know this happens. But we also know that genuine conversions happened then.

Because, in the words of Psalm 135 verse 6, we realise, "The LORD does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths." This is something David Hume couldn't and wouldn't believe. That's why he went looking for his 'evidence' to prove otherwise.

God Works Through All That's Here

And, so, having seen that GOD DOESN'T AT ALL STOP THERE we move on to realise GOD WORKS THROUGH ALL THAT'S HERE. Article 1 began "God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern," and then it describes who He does it through. And these are "all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and holy providence."

We have to be careful here that having seen the error of Deism we don't fall into its opposite extreme of Pantheism. This is where the difference between God and the world is wiped out, so the Creator and creation are seen to be identical to each other. God is thought of then as the essence of the world, and the world as the manifestation of God. It's like the ocean and the waves; the visible and the invisible; the ying and the yang.

If I'm beginning to sound like some eastern guru, or a tree-loving environmentalist, that's especially where we see that teaching. So it's actually quite influential today. And as when it rains in the world it invariably leaks in the church, so this can be seen within Christian churches also.

In a way that was inevitable. The extremes of charismatic mysticism show the teaching of becoming one in essence with God. Testimonies abound of physical talks and walks with Jesus - even of warmly hugging Him! Writers like Floyd McClung promote an intimacy with God where He needs to have us heal His broken Father-heart.

And we could think that this is what seems to be mentioned in Scripture. In addressing the Athenians, in Acts 17 verse 28, Paul says about God, 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' But putting that in its context we see that Paul is actually drawing those people away from pantheism. He has said in the verses 24 and 25, "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else."

The same seriousness with which we insist on keeping the connection and relationship between creation and providence should also keep the distinction between them. It's not only in name and form that God and the world are to be distinguished from each other, but also in essence, in being. They differ as time differs from eternity, the infinite from the finite, and the Creator differs from the creation.

To fall into that pantheistic trap pulls God down. Then He becomes your ‘good mate’, ‘the old man’, ‘the bloke upstairs’. And then we’re no different than the pagans whom Paul describes in Romans chapter 1. In verse 21 there he says that while they knew God they neither glorified him as God or gave thanks to Him.

And if we are one with God in the way so many are teaching today, you also have to wonder about something else, because every thought and action would then have to be God’s responsibility. So sin too is His responsibility. Actually, then there would be no sin.

Ah, isn’t this strands of perfectionism? They are those who say the church has arrived, that Christ did return in 70 A.D. with the fall of Jerusalem.

What, you didn’t know? No wonder you’ve been missing out! You have to simply name and claim it!

Here we see where Deism and Pantheism hold hands. Because they both believe that man himself is the one to uphold, direct, dispose, and govern. And forget then that last part of Article 1 about it being “according to God’s infallible fore-knowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will, to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.”

Can you see where those extremes lead us? It’s certainly not bringing us back to the Lord. In fact, it’s taking us completely away from Him. And history shows that that’s what Deism and Pantheism in Christianity does.

This is where the Unitarian churches come from. Their roots are from Deism affecting Christianity in the 18th century. They have a doctrinal basis which shows that. Thus they deny the Trinity and anything that could possibly be seen to be miraculous. That’s why when the Auckland Unitarian church recently advertised for a new minister, the one defining quality that he definitely had to have was that he would promote no supernatural doctrines whatsoever! In fact, these essence of the advertisement was that it was best that he didn’t believe anything too seriously at all!

And this is where the so-called ‘Toronto Blessing’ has come from. Because despite the obscure Bible texts they come up with, this experience is nothing other than the connection with the godhead found in pantheism.

Because both these extremes take us away from the God of the Bible, there’s a great insecurity. When you have a YWAM leader saying that ‘righteousness’ simply means “right choices” you’re leaving it all up to people. And in the end you simply cannot keep it up!

God Will Bring All To Acknowledge His Care

That’s why it’s important to note, in the third place that GOD WILL BRING ALL TO ACKNOWLEDGE HIS CARE. You see, Deism and Pantheism don’t help us in the hard times. If it is up to us then what have we got when our lives seem so dark and dismal? What about those so-called tragedies in life? How do you explain hundreds blown to pieces, or thousands perishing in earthquakes? You obviously haven’t discovered enough or prayed enough!

If God were God though! If it were true that man is never independent of Him. If it were, as Psalm 33 verse 13 says, that the Lord looks down and sees all mankind. If it were, as verse 15 of that same psalm says, that God formed the hearts of us all and considers all that we do. If it were, as we read in Acts 17 verse 26, that God determined the times set for us and the exact places where we should live. If it were, as Jeremiah 10 verse 23 says, that God directs all our steps. And if it were, as Romans 9 verse 21 says, that God is the potter and we are the clay - wouldn’t you have the greatest assurance?

No devil, but God the Almighty, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, created the world. It's in its whole, and in all its parts, the work of His hands, and of His hands alone! Once He created it, He did not let it go. He sustains it. He governs it. He rules over it all in such a way that it's all coming together in His plan. **GOD WILL BRING ALL TO ACKNOWLEDGE HIS CARE.**

Having said all this it's becomes clear that you can't really believe this with your heart and confess it with your mouth unless you know you're His child. The faith in providence can't be removed from the faith in salvation.

It can be said that to some extent nature and history testify about this God. Also that's what's inside each one of us. We are God's creatures after all, and as men and women we're especially created in His image, with souls. But it doesn't come home to us until the Lord brings us home. So let's recognise that nothing happens by chance or fate. Things don't just happen. And it's not true that there's nothing anyone can do about it. We know the loving Heavenly Father. He's working out everything in His perfect way. This is all working to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy. That makes such a difference. Then we can see God's hand in all things.

In 1815 the Prussian queen, Louise, wrote a letter about Napoleon to her father. In this letter she said, "It were a crime to say that God is with the French Emperor. But he is obviously an instrument in the hands of the Almighty to bury out of sight the old order, for which he has no further purpose."

You see, whether men despise or admire Napoleon, they must all acknowledge that he broke down the barriers between men and nations. He, like Cromwell, shook down in the dust what God had condemned. He told his soldiers that each one of them carried in his knapsack a marshal's baton. And so he was the preacher and herald of the popular movements that have swept the world since then - sometimes for good and often-times for evil. He preached a terrific sermon on the text that the nations that forgot God will be thrown into hell. Without knowing it he promoted a moral order. And in his fall from power, like the star Wormwood out of heaven, he was a witness that righteousness and judgment are what belong to God's throne.

In those powerful words of Romans 8, all things are working out for the good, and especially for the good of those love God, because they have faith in Jesus Christ. Luke 12, verse 7, says even the hairs of our head are all numbered. Nothing happens without it being part of God's care. Isn't that exactly what your life is showing - out there?