

WESTMINSTER CONFSSION OF FAITH X

(Reading: John 6:25-51; 2 Samuel 12:15-23)

How God Calls

Something incredible happens in Article 1. A heart of stone is turned into a heart of flesh! What had for all intents and purposes been as inanimate and cold as rock becomes moving, beating, and warm.

We see here where it all comes together spiritually for us. This is the part where those foundational truths of the Christian faith in the first 8 chapters come home to us.

You see, the Confession has dealt with God's eternal purpose of salvation. It has outlined how that has come to us in the Gospel. Now it turns to the communication and application of the gospel to men.

So in chapter 10, and what follows until chapter 18, it lays out what happens to the lives of men when they receive the gospel – and then what happens when it takes effect in them.

This is what has been known by the Latin phrase, 'Ordo Salutis'. Translated, this means 'Order of Salvation'. This is about the free offer of the gospel, regeneration, conversion, justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification.

Quite a mouthful! And well it ought to be! Because we don't dare to treat what God is doing through us lightly at all.

God Calls Ordinarily Through His Word & Spirit

So let's see how God calls. And in the first place we note that **GOD CALLS ORDINARILY THROUGH HIS WORD & SPIRIT.**

The Gospel is declared to all men. The special revelation of what God has done in Jesus Christ is being proclaimed throughout the world – more people than ever before are hearing and reading the Biblical message. The Church does this because, as Romans 10 verse 17 tells us, "faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ." And so the Lord brings His Word to those He decrees will respond to it.

In the Old Testament He saw to it that Rahab and Ruth heard it. In the New Testament we see how the apostle Paul is deliberately guided by the Lord's Spirit as to where he must go next. In Acts 16 verse 7 his course is changed around. The Spirit stops him continuing on with his travels through Asia Minor – which is modern day western Turkey. Then he hears that voice in the vision calling him from Macedonia, which is northern Greece.

And so it is that in Acts 16 verse 14 Lydia is converted - the first convert in Europe! As it says there, "The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message." You see, God is working out, through His Church, that the elect will hear it.

This is what Jesus spoke of in John 10 verse 16. There He said, "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd."

George Whitefield was preaching once at Exeter. As was often the case in the large audiences he addressed, he had those there who were far from Christian. In fact, some had come there to berate him. That day there was even a man there who had loaded his pockets with stones to throw at this minister.

He let Whitefield open with prayer, though. As soon as Whitefield had named his text, however, that man pulled a stone out of his pocket and was waiting for the right time to throw it. But God sent a word to his heart, and the stone dropped from his hand.

After the sermon he went up to Whitefield. He told him, “Sir, I came to hear you this day, with a view the break your **head**, but the Spirit of God, through your ministry has given me a broken **heart**.” That man went on to live a completely changed around life. The Lord brings His Word to those He sees will respond to it.

Now, as we look at the way it’s explained in Article 1, there’s an order in all this. Logically we would say that the mind is enlightened so that the truth is truly seen, the heart is awakened to hate evil and love what’s good, and the will is renewed so that a genuine and willing response is made to the call of Christ in the Gospel. But when it happens it happens! You can’t draw these distinctions then.

So we should not look for them to happen in a certain order and way. Yet we can certainly see when this change takes place! And afterwards we’ll notice the difference in our minds and hearts and wills!

But let’s not forget that while many hear the Word few come to faith. That puzzles us who have been saved. We can’t think of a more precious and blessed place to be! To us it’s where everyone logically ought to be!

Here Article 2 helps us. For there we see that we’re completely passive in the process. Unless God acts, through His Spirit, a man or woman cannot answer this call.

This plain teaching of Scripture does not sit easy with many believers, and so different teachings have come into the church about this. Arminianism in particular avoids the Bible by trying to make the work of God depend on the work of man. So they say that God foresees who will accept the gospel. Then because God foresees that when the time comes he regenerates him.

So in Romans 9 where the apostle Paul addresses this he would have to change a few words. For in verse 18 there he writes that “God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden”. Under Arminianism he would have to say that “God has mercy on whom he has to have mercy and he hardens no one.”

That is a poor doctrine indeed – no wonder that those who labour under it can never quite sure whether they are saved or not. Unless it is as Jesus says in John 6 verse 37, that “All that the Father gives to me will come to me,” no one can ever have assurance.

The teaching of Scripture is that **GOD CALLS ORDINARILY THROUGH HIS WORD AND SPIRIT**. So you have to be saved. And that brings in a perennial question, “But what about those who die as babies?”

God Calls Extra-Ordinarily Through His Spirit Alone

Here we move to Article 3. For here we have to see that **GOD CALLS EXTRA-ORDINARILY THROUGH HIS SPIRIT ALONE**.

This is a very real issue to many among us. It was not that long ago that I met a family who had experienced four miscarriages. One of those was a still-born child as well. For a long while afterwards, and perhaps still today, they wonder about the eternal destination of those children. You see, they couldn’t be sure whether they are in heaven or hell. They would even quote Article 3 here, because that speaks about “elect” infants being saved. And they didn’t know whether their children were elect or not.

Were they right? Is that what this Article tells them? Is it simply stating that we recognise that God chooses who He chooses and we can't ever know who that is?

Well, let's note first that this is part of the Chapter called 'Effectual Calling'. So it is specifically about God's communicating and applying salvation. And therefore it is confessing that the Spirit works when and where and how He pleases.

But we cannot take it out of the bigger picture, either. Chapter 7, for example, spoke about "God's Covenant with Man". That was concerning the covenant of grace which the Lord takes with His people. This is what Acts 2 the verses 38 and 39 point us to. It's there, at Pentecost, that Peter responds to those who are struck in their hearts by his sermon. When they cry out to him what they should do he says, "Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off - for all whom the Lord our God will call."

There is a strong sense of covenant here. God deals with us in families, like Lydia and her whole household was baptised, and the Philippian Jailer, and like we read of from 2nd Samuel 12 in that sad story of the death of David and Bathsheba's baby.

Well, not that we excuse David in any way. The child was the result of adultery. But we can feel the anguish of a parent for their child. While there's life there's hope. So David prays as hard as any parent would.

But notice what he does when he hears that the boy has died. He gets up from his praying on the ground, washes, puts on lotions, and goes and worships the LORD in the tabernacle. His servants ask him why he does this. They thought the child's death would really make him despair. But David answers, in verses 22 and 23, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, 'Who knows? The LORD may be gracious to me and let the child live.' But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him but he will not return to me." He left it in God's hands. The LORD knew what was best. And so he was confident that the LORD had acted for the best.

It's this thought that is reflected in the Canons of Dort written some 25 years before the Westminster. That was a Synod with some of the same theologians were involved in drawing up the Westminster Confession. And the Canons of Dort confess in Article 17 of the First Main Point of Doctrine, "Since we must make judgments about God's will from His Word, which testifies that the children of believers are holy, not by nature but by virtue of the gracious covenant in which they together with their parents are included, godly parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom God calls out of this life in infancy."

The same is true of those who are mentally incapable of being outwardly called by the Word. And how wonderful that is congregation! You see, while Calvinism is so often described as harsh and foreboding, here it could not be more merciful. For Arminianism looks for a decision that man has to make. And that may sound well and good when men imagine they can do that, but there's no comfort for those who have no strength of their own, whether they know it or not. It's no surprise that many Christians believe today that all babies dying are saved, whether they had believing parents or not. But that definitely doesn't do justice to God's Word. That's just universalism and there's no gospel there!

We fell into sin with Adam. We deserved nothing except eternal damnation. And that's the same for babies, too. Unless they are joined by faith they have no hope, which is why God's covenant promise is the ultimate hope.

God Calls Ineffectively Through All Else

And it's here we meet those outside of that hope. In the words of a third aspect GOD CALLS INEFFECTIVELY THROUGH ALL ELSE. Article 4 is about those non-elect people who are rationally capable but either do not respond or do not hear the Christian Gospel. So they don't come to Christ. They don't profess the Christian religion.

In John 6 the Lord is quite up-front about this. In verse 64 He says to those around Him, "Yet there are some of you who do not believe." And He wasn't talking about a temporary situation for them. One like Judas would never come to saving faith.

This is a difficult teaching, but difficult not because it isn't clear but because of who it excludes. For all those who hear the Gospel but don't respond in repentance and faith, and all those who never hear the Gospel, like those in unevangelised countries, are lost – they are reprobate.

Rowland Ward notes that as to those who have never heard the Gospel, the Confession does not actually affirm they are lost. But it does affirm that they cannot be saved except by coming to Christ. This amounts to the same thing in practice.

We shouldn't underestimate the value of pieces of special revelation which have become embedded in the traditions of people who haven't come under the Gospel. God may use those things to bring them to feel their sin and to trust in Christ, if they knew of Him. But if there are cases of this kind they only prove the rule: If people call on the Lord, they will be saved; in order to call on Him, they must believe; in order to believe, they must hear; in order to hear, the gospel must be brought to them.

This is certainly motivation for us to support mission throughout the world. Acts 4 verse 12 is so true when Peter said there is no other Name under heaven by which men may be saved except the name of Jesus.

It is an interesting footnote that when Reformed and Presbyterian denominations become liberal this doctrine is one of the first to go. And soon enough they aren't doing missions to Jews, or Moslems, or anyone else!

In looking back to Article 4, we see how the Parable of the Sower is very apt here, because while some seed is wasted straight-away others do come up straight-away. It looks like it's a genuine crop, but soon it dies because it has no root. Others become choked up by the world.

So within a church there are those who haven't been called. They can seem to be Christians, they do a lot of the things Christians do, and they may even say the things Christians do. They've heard the Gospel, they respond in certain ways. But unless they come to Christ through His calling them in His Word, by His Spirit, they are not saved. As Jesus said in John 14 verse 6, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me you would know my Father as well."

Dear friend, do you know Him that way? Are you His child? Do you pray crying out, "'Abba,' Father?"