

Westminster

A review of the Westminster Confession

Week 1: History and Context • Week 2: Sola Scriptura • **Week 3: Sovereignty of God**

Week 4: Covenant Life • Week 5: A Living Faith

Bible Study – Ephesians 1 – 2

(See also Romans 1 – 8)

*Blessed be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as **he chose us in Christ** before the foundations of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. **He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.** In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.*

*In Christ we have also **gained an inheritance**, having been **destined** according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.*

*I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason, I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the **God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation** as you come to know him, so that with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.*

God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

*You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – **by grace you have been saved** – and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in*

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*Christ Jesus. **For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not by your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what God made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.***

Questions

1. Who is the primary actor in the passage – the entity setting everything in motion and keeping it going?
2. Who is the “you” in this passage? To whom is Paul writing this message?
3. What makes the “you” so special? What are key words Paul uses to describe their special relationship with God?
4. What actions have they taken to deserve this special status?
5. What about all the other people not included in Paul’s “you?”

The Great Decree – God’s Sovereignty

***II.2** - God has all life, glory, goodness, and blessedness in and of himself. He alone is all sufficient in and to himself, not standing in need of any creatures which he has made, nor deriving any glory from them, but rather manifesting his own glory in by to and on them. He alone is the foundation of all being, of whom, through whom, and to who are all things. **He has absolute sovereignty over them, to do by them, for them, or upon them whatever he pleases.** In his sight all things are open and manifest; his knowledge is infinite, infallible, and independent of his creatures; so that nothing to him is contingent or uncertain. He is most holy in all his counsels, in all his works, and in all his commands. To him is due from angels and men, and every other creature, whatever worship, service or obedience he is pleased to require of them.*

***III.1** - God, from all eternity, did – by the most wise and holy counsel of his own free will – freely and unchangeably ordain whatever comes to pass. Yet he ordered all things in such a way that he is not the author of sin, nor does he force his creatures to act against their wills; neither is the liberty or contingency of second causes (things that happen as a result of human actions) taken away, but rather established.*

The Big Question: Does God Cause Sin?

If God ordains whatever comes to pass and sin comes to pass, then does God ordain sin?

[Pilate, interrogating Jesus] Pilate asked Jesus, “Where are you from?” But Jesus gave him no answer. Pilate therefore said to him, “Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?” Jesus answered him, “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.”

John 19:9-11

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From Van Dixhoorn

“We know from all of scripture that it was the plan of the triune God to send a Savior who would die on a cross. But this does not mean God was the author of the evil that was Pilate’s. God was no more at fault for what Pilate and the soldiers did than he was for what Adam did in the garden.

Now the declaration that God ordains all things, and yet does not command sin, leaves many questions unanswered ...

The Big Tension: God’s Sovereignty vs. Human Free Will

Westminster wants to proclaim what they consider two core biblical truths:

1. God reigns sovereign over all things, controls all things, decides all things. Nothing happens in the world outside of divine purpose.
2. Humans are completely free in their actions, and are responsible for their actions. Sin, evil and hurt in this world are human’s fault, not God’s.

Questions

1. What limits God?
2. How does God being in total control give comfort? What questions arise?
3. Is it possible to declare God completely sovereign and declare humanity completely free?
4. How does the Reformed understanding of salvation by grace alone push Westminster towards this tension?

Predestination & Election

Three Paths to Salvation

- The Christian chooses the right church: Salvation is assured by the Christian’s participation in the correct church. If a Christian follow’s that church’s teaching, participates in its rituals and supports it with prayer and tithes then their salvation is assured.

And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. (Matt. 16:18-19)

- The Christian chooses Christ: Salvation is assured by the Christian making a “personal decision for Jesus,” repenting of their sins and committing themselves to the way of Christ.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son so that whosoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)

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- God chooses the Christian: Salvation is assured by God freely choosing the undeserving Christian, guaranteeing salvation regardless of the Christian's individual actions.

Just as God chose us in Christ before the foundations of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ according to the good pleasure of his will. (Ephesians 1:4-5)

The Confession

III.3 – By God's decree, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestined into everlasting life, and others are foreordained into everlasting death.

III.5 – Those people who are predestined to life – before the foundation of the world was laid, according to his eternal and unchangeable purpose and the secret counsel and good pleasure of his will – has chosen in Christ to everlasting glory. He chose them out of his free grace and love alone, not because he foresaw faith or good works, or perseverance in either of these, or anything else in the creature, as conditions or causes moving him to do this; and all to the praise of his glorious grace.

III.6 – God's chosen ones, all of them being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ and are effectually called to faith in Christ by his Spirit working in due season. They are justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept by his power, through faith, unto salvation. No others are redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified and saved, except the elect only.

X.1 – All those, and only those, whom God has predestined to life, he is pleased to call effectually in his appointed and accepted time, by his Word and Spirit. He calls them from the state of sin and death – in which they are by nature – to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ. In this calling, God enlightens their minds spiritually and savingly so that they understand the things of God. He takes away their hearts of stone and gives them hearts of flesh, renews their wills, and by his almighty power turns them to what is good and effectually draws them to Jesus Christ. Yet he does this in a way they come most freely, being made willing by his grace.

X.4 – Although other persons who are not elected may be called by the ministry of the Word and may experience some common operations of the Spirit, yet they never really come to Christ and therefore cannot be saved. Much less can men not professing to be Christians be saved in any other way...

XVIII.1 – Although hypocrites and other unregenerate men may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and fleshly presumptions that they are in God's favor and in a state of salvation, this hope of theirs will perish. Nevertheless those who truly believe on the Lord Jesus, love him sincerely, and strive to live in all good conscience before him, may in this life be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace...

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Questions

1. How does predestination and election work? Who does what?
2. How do you know if someone is predestined? Or not predestined?
3. What is comforting about this theology? Disturbing? Is it Biblical? (See “Going Deeper”)
4. With this theology what is the point of preaching, teaching and evangelism?
5. What are some dangers for churches and/or individual Christians when they believe they are God’s chosen to the exclusion of others?

Providence

V.1 – God – the great Creator of all things – upholds, directs, disposes and governs all creatures, actions and things from the greatest even to the least. *He exercises this most wise and holy providence according to his infallible foreknowledge and the free and unchangeable counsel of his own will ...*

V.5 – The most wise, righteous and gracious God often leaves his own children, for a time, to manifold temptations and to the corruption of his own hearts. *He does this to chastise them for their past sins, to humble them by making them aware of the hidden strength of the corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts, and then to raise them to a closer, more constant dependence upon himself, to make them more watchful against all future occasions for sinning and to fulfill various other just and holy purposes.*

From Van Dixhoorn

“All things are under God’s control, from the greatest even to the least. All things are under God’s direction, even the sparrow sadly dropping from the sky; even the hair sadly dropping from our heads. (Mat. 10:29-31)

Questions

1. How does the idea that God has a plan for everything and everything happens according to God’s plan give comfort? Discomfort?
2. How does the Westminster Catechism explain suffering? Who is responsible for suffering?
3. Pastor Fritz often preaches what he calls the chaos theory of suffering. He states God has a plan (or an ideal) for each person which, in human sinfulness, we do not stick to. Our deviation from the plan causes us to come into conflict with each other, and through conflict, causes suffering. God then works to redeem and heal in the face of such suffering. How does this teaching differ from Westminster? What are its pros and cons?

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A Different Approach: The Brief Statement of Faith

In 1983 to mark the reunion of the northern and southern halves of American Presbyterianism the General Assembly commissioned a new confession to celebrate Presbyterian's common theological identity. It too draws upon the themes of adoption and belonging, rooting itself in the language of Romans and Ephesians. Excerpts are below.

*In life and in death we belong to God.
Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love and God
and the communion of the Holy Spirit,
we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,
whom alone we worship and serve.*

*In everlasting love
the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people
to bless all families of the earth.*

*Loving us still
God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant
Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child
Like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home
God is faithful still.*

*The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith
sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor
and binds us together with all believers
in the one body of Christ, the church.*

*With believers in every time and place
we rejoice that nothing in life or in death
can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Going Deeper

The Biblical Case for Predestination into Hell

The writers of Westminster offer three verses as proof of predestination into hell:

Matthew 25:41

Then [the Son of Man] will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.'

This passage is taken from the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matt. 25:31-46) where the accursed are accursed because of their failure to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit the imprisoned.

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Romans 9:22-23

What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience the objects of wrath that are made for destruction; and what if he has done so in order to make known the riches of his glory for the objects of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory

This passage is taken from a longer passage where Paul expands on the doctrine of election, making the point “God has mercy on whom he shows mercy, and have compassion on whom he has compassion.” (Ex. 33:19) Paul also mentions how God “hardened Pharaoh’s heart.”

Jude 1:4

Certain intruders have stolen in among you, people who long ago were designated for this condemnation as ungodly, who pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord Jesus Christ.

Jude, at only 25 verses long, is a blistering retort against those who defile the church by their actions.

Resources

For the official Presbyterian version of the Westminster Confession:

Book of Confessions, PC(USA)

For historical & theological background

Fesko, J.V., The Theology of the Westminster Standards (Crossway Books, 2014)

Rogers, Jack, Presbyterian Creeds (Westminster Press, 1985)

For an overview of 16th century England

Ackroyd, Peter, Rebellion (Thomas Dunne Books, 2014)