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CONFESSIONS AND DOCTRINAL PREACHING





Founders Ministries is committed to encouraging the recovery of the gospel and the biblical reformation of local churches. We believe that the biblical faith is inherently doctrinal, and are therefore confessional in our approach. We recognize the time-tested *Second London Baptist Confession of Faith* (1689) as a faithful summary of important biblical teachings.

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Tom Nettles

Introduction

The Nature and Form of a Confession

As we recall the vigorous and pervasive impact that the Second London Confession had on Baptist witness for three and a quarter centuries, this journal seeks to propose several very practical and pastoral ways in which it can be employed. The ever-recurring call upon a pastor's time, energy, and spirit is the amazing privilege and duty of opening the Word of God to the people under his charge week by week. This edition of the *Founders Journal* points to ways in which the Confession can help maintain some lovely interest and substantial ornamentation to the rhythm of sermon production and delivery. We include several outlines of sermon suggestions derived from selected chapters of the *Second London Confession*. Before we undertake that project, I want to write a bit about the nature and value of confessions of faith and encourage readers to take advantage of their treasures.

Initially, consider the nature of a confession. This consideration, hopefully, will give some tips about how to use them for a more profound way of communicating expository and doctrinal substance to the people. One advantage to mull over is that confessions express biblical teaching in a distinctive way. First, they are founded on a long history of biblical exposition. They emerge in the history of the church from a matrix of interpretative data that has been proved and reproved in an extended effort to grasp the teaching of the Word of God on particular ideas that have been seen as cardinal tenets of biblical revelation.

From an expository standpoint, confessional categories must arise from a grammatical, literary, historical exposition of Scripture.

Second, they provided a synthesis of this exposition. They witness to our confidence in the Bible's consistency, concluding that teachings on respective subjects, in accordance with the analogy of faith, may be put together to discover what the entire Bible says about the subjects to which our minds would be oblivious without the riches of divine revelation. Third, confessions provide a connective milieu for relating the doctrines of Scripture to each other in a meaningful way. The interrelationships between subjects should be explored and proper connections indicated: e.g. law, sin, atonement, person of Christ, justification, sanctification, assurance, etc.

Third, look at the very pragmatic reality that confessions give clear and exclusive expression of a controverted doctrine. Some confessions arose as baptismal confessions, truths for new converts to express as constituting their faith in Christ and commitment to the Scripture as their guide for living. For these personal expressions of faith to reflect the unity of the faith of the church throughout the world, the individual items of expression should be uniform, if not in exact wording, then in substance. When divergence came in the understanding of the substance of these confessions, they were reasserted with explanatory language and expanded explanations. They began to serve a polemical purpose in addition to their being the matter of expression of personal faith. Doctrinal ideas became more expansive and led to more extended doctrinal exposition of the Word of God. Confessions included articles on the nature of God as unique, eternally triune, sovereign, utterly and uniquely independent and self-existent, infinitely wise, and the perfection of all excellence in virtue, beauty, purpose, and knowledge. Articles on the person of Christ emphasized the fullness of his two natures, humanity and deity, unchangeably and inconfusedly united in one person. The issue of the nature and effects of sin had to be sorted out and given clearer definition which naturally led to discussion of the nature of salvation. Other doctrines eventually were given similar attention, filling out the full range of revealed truth from eternity past to the occupation of both God and man in eternity future.

Confessions help focus our attention on central issues of faith. They give attention to ideas in biblical revelation that have occupied the minds and energized the discussions of serious-minded Christian thinkers and ministers in former years. Because of this characteristic, they help present day ministers avoid the danger of personal idiosyncrasies in doctrine and emphasis as well as dodge the fallacy of giving too little attention to important doctrines.

Confessions give the foundation of witness to the world. The Christian ministry of apologetics must be based on true Christianity. Seeking to defend doctrines that orthodox, evangelical Christianity does not teach is a vain and profitless exercise. Defense of the faith and the readiness to give an answer for the hope that is in us has vitality and meaning to the degree that the ideas defended are true and actually a vital element of the corpus of Christian truth. Likewise, a grasp of doctrinal connections informs and supports evangelism. Neither the Pharisees nor the Judaizers, though they proselytized vigorously, did Christian evangelism, for they taught false doctrine. Jesus said that the Pharisees, in all their zeal and success, made their converts twice the children of hell as they themselves were. Paul told the Galatians that if they adopted the demand for circumcision they forfeited a soteriology of grace. True doctrine is essential for evangelism; confessions help us focus with greater clarity on Christian truth.

In the pursuit of the whole truth and purity in worship, Christians have separated from one another on certain issues. Confessions define with clarity the distinction between one Christian group and another. For the purpose of conscientious Christian discipleship, we must recognize with candor that all denominations are not the same and certain elements of their understanding of what constitutes obedience to the commands of Christ differ. In light of this reality, confessions help each individual live with clear conscience before God.

Confessions give expression to one's loyalty to the Bible as the Word of God. Some have sought to present confessions as idols or substitutes for the Bible. On the contrary, they do not substitute for the Bible but help conserve and protect biblical truth. The movement of Pietism sought to correct the tendency among the members of state-churches to neglect the Bible because of their nominal connection with a confessional tradition. Their emphasis on Bible study was, and is, much needed, but they did not reject the appropriate usefulness of confessions. Opposition to confessions frequently masks a rejection of established biblical doctrine, and even the final authority of Scripture itself. This was certainly the case among many members of the Baptist Union in the Downgrade Controversy in England in 1887–88. So it was in the Northern Baptist convention in 1922. When William Bell Riley moved that the convention adopt the New Hampshire Confessions of Faith, the convention passed a substitute motion suggested by the liberal Cornelius Wolfkin that they adopt the New Testament alone for they needed no other confession. This was truly a horribly deceitful cover-up.

Within the Bible itself, we find clear suggestions that confessional statements, distilled concentrations of cardinal truths are helpful and serve in the protection of the whole

corpus of biblical truth. The command to memorize the “Hear, O Israel,” in Deuteronomy 6:7 and to meditate on it as reinforced by the theological reflection seen in Mark 12:28–34 is an indication of such confessional commitment. Several passages in 1 Timothy (1:15; 2:3–6; 3:16) give evidence of the heuristic power of confessions. I believe the same is true for 2 Timothy 1:8–11; 2:11–13 as well as 1 John 4:2.

Historical factors have conspired to give a recognizable form to most confessions. What is called the “Rule of Faith” existing in several versions in the early church eventually became a test in the immediate post-apostolic age for the orthodoxy of professors of the faith. Giving uniformity to these “rules” developed the Apostles’ Creed. This in turn became foundation for the production of the Creed of Nicea, 325, adopted to exclude Arianism, and the Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 that expanded to affirm the deity and personality of the Holy Spirit. At Chalcedon in 451 a mature statement asserting the biblical elements concerning the person of Christ, and avoiding the various insufficient rationalizations, was adopted.

In the sixteenth century, Reformation confessions expanded those creeds, while affirming all the essentials of orthodoxy, to include affirmations of sola scriptura, the doctrine of justification by faith, the perfection of the work of Christ, and some corrections concerning the Sacraments. A mature expression of reformation theology is found in the Westminster Confession. Prior to the *Westminster Confession*, Baptists had defined themselves through the use of confessions, but after that beautiful, coherent, and comprehensive expression of Reformed truth was published, Baptists found sympathy with using that form in their own continuing witness through confessions. General Baptists produced the *Orthodox Creed* while the Particular Baptists produced the *Second London Confession*. That led to a family of confessions known as the *Philadelphia Confession*, the *Charleston Confession*, and the *Abstract of Principles*.

Due to certain doctrinal pressures from a variety of standpoints that pressed on the Regular Baptists of New England, they set forth an answer in the New Hampshire Confession in 1833. This, through the influence of E. Y. Mullins, became mother to the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message*, and developments of that confession in 1963 and 2000. Each of these developments was prompted by the need to give clarification to a doctrinal challenge of the day.

One of the pastors in the Philadelphia Association in 1817 made a strange but serious accusation against the churches of the association. He averred, “The doctrines of

sovereign grace, which distinguish our excellent Confession of Faith, are seldom or never heard.” The associational letter for that year was on the doctrine of limited atonement, and the “Corresponding Letter” to other associations made the resolute affirmation, “The assemblage of Bible doctrine, a summary of which is contained in the confession of faith which our fathers had long ago adopted as their rule of faith and practice, we continue cordially to embrace, steadfastly maintain and publicly avow; aspersions to the contrary notwithstanding.” On the 325th anniversary of the Second London Confession, I believe that “assemblage of doctrine” still would be beneficial to “embrace, steadfastly maintain and publicly avow.” In the interest of aiding the public avowal of these great truths, this edition of the Founders Journal gives suggestions concerning how the articles could serve as an encouragement to doctrinal preaching.

Earl Blackburn’s article on chapter 8 of the confession gives a rich doctrinal discussion of one phrase out of a large article. His introduction, however, gives a more comprehensive background in the historical development of the formal statement to the entire section on Christology. His focus on the Holy Spirit’s ministry as necessarily operative in the appearance, labors, and consummation of the work of the incarnate Lord should provide thoughtful hints for a series of sermons.

Tom Ascol has selected several sections of the article on the church, twenty-six, and provides a maturely-conceived, well-organized, and thoughtfully presented outline of several important ecclesiological issues—origin, membership, government, authority, communion with other churches. This suggests another series of messages on a vital subject whose importance sometimes is minimized. Every pastor, under the authority of and by the will of Christ, will have a ministry that is directed toward and channeled through the local church. Failure to grasp the revealed structure and operations of this “peculiar people,” for whom Christ died, can be fatal to the usefulness of a preacher of the gospel.

Jeff Johnson launches into a discussion of God’s decree, one of the most difficult, but equally rewarding, doctrinal subjects of the confession, as it has systematized the biblical teaching on that subject. He has chosen to give a sentence outline of the entire chapter. He seeds it carefully with Scripture quotations and pithy doctrinal points. The result is an impressive presentation of the confession’s teaching and the Bible’s clarity on what is, but should not be, a subject of contention and discomfort. Again, at the proper time, a minister of the Word will find some rich material for a doctrinal series on how God conceives and sets forth His own purpose in creation, providence, redemption, judgment, and consummation.

The constant desire of Founders Ministries for all its readers is that God will be glorified, the church will be edified, and ministers of the gospel will be strengthened and encouraged by this material.



Earl Blackburn

1689 Confession Outline

Chapter 8

The Holy Spirit in the Life and Ministry of Christ John 3:22–36

“The Lord Jesus, in His human nature thus united to the divine, in the person of the Son, was *sanctified and anointed* with the Holy Spirit above measure, having in Him all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge; in whom it pleased the Father that all fullness should dwell...” [LBC 8:3, emphasis added]¹

Introduction

In the Gospel of John 3:22–36, several features are revealed about Christ to which we should give closer attention for the edification of the body of Christ:

1. Christ is the dispenser of saving illumination (v. 27–29)
2. Christ is the preeminent One—He must constantly increase and His ministers must constantly decrease (v. 30)
3. Christ is above all (v. 31–32)
4. Christ speaks the Word of God as God’s appointed Prophet (v. 34a)
5. Christ possesses the Spirit without measure (v. 34b)

6. Christ is the chief delight of the Father (v. 35a)
7. Christ has all things placed into His hand (singular) (v. 35b)
8. Christ is the center of all saving belief (v. 36a)
9. Christ is the litmus test of life and death (v. 36b)

Of particular interest is verse 34b (“...for God does not give [Him] the Spirit by measure”), which leads to the Confession’s statement above. All believers have the Holy Spirit to a measured degree; no one possesses all the graces and gifts of the Spirit. Christ, however, possessed the Holy Spirit fully, without measure.

The relationship between Christ and the Holy Spirit necessarily is defined by the hypostatic union of the two natures of Christ. Leo I (c. 449) of Rome wrote a magnificent treatise, balancing the exegetical truths of the Councils of Nicaea, Constantinople, and Ephesus. It is known historically as *Leo’s Tome* and became the biblical and foundational teaching on the person of Christ at the Council of Chalcedon (451) and in the Western Catholic and Protestant churches of today. Notable is his uncommon precision in the beautiful balancing of truth:

He who became man in the form of a servant is He who in the form of God created man... Thus, in the whole and perfect nature of true manhood true God was born—complete in what belonged to Him, complete in what belonged to us...one and the same mediator between God and man, the man Jesus Christ, should be able both to die in respect of the one and not to die in respect to the other...Each form accomplishes in concert with the other what is appropriate to it, the Word performing what belongs to the Word, and the flesh carrying out what belongs to the flesh. The one is resplendent with miracles, the other succumbs to injuries. ...by reason of this unity of person to be understood in both natures, the Son of Man is said to have come down from heaven when the Son of God took flesh from the Virgin from whom He was born; and again the Son of God is said to have been crucified and buried, though He suffered those things not in the Godhead itself, wherein the Only Begotten is coeternal and consubstantial with the Father, but in the weakness of human nature.

The Definition of Chalcedon (AD 451) contains the creedal conclusion:

Therefore, following the holy fathers, we all with one accord teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance

with us as regards his manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin; as regards his Godhead, begotten of the Father before the ages, but yet as regards his manhood begotten, for us men and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin, the God-bearer; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from earliest times spoke of him, and our Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the creed of the fathers has handed down to us.

NOTE: The Council of Chalcedon sought to delineate biblically the relationship between Christ's humanity and His deity. It must be carefully noted that the connection of the Holy Spirit being given to Christ "without measure" pertains to His full humanity!

The fundamental idea connected with the MESSIAH, [was] that He SHOULD BE ANOINTED WITH THE SPIRIT,...The title CHRIST or MESSIAH was given to the Redeemer from the peculiar unction of the Spirit conferred on Him, which was unique in nature and in degree. The different servants of God, who were filled with the Spirit, but in a far other way, illustrate this remark by contrast ... But with Christ it was wholly different. The infinite fullness of the Spirit which was given to Him was constant and uninterrupted, and the result of the hypostatic union—that is, was the effect of humanity being assumed into personal union by the only-begotten Son. (George Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, p. 45)

I. What Is the Trinitarian Connection Between Christ & the Holy Spirit?

NOTE: There are **ten** events where the Holy Spirit is connected with the Person and Work of Christ:

A. His **birth** (Matthew 1:18–20)

"The incarnation is the profoundest of all mysteries and the miracle in which all other miracles are hid..." (J. Stuart Holden, *The Price of Power*, 49)

1. It was by the conception of the Holy Spirit that the eternal Son of God became the Son of Man; and
2. it is clear that the virgin birth brought about by the Holy Spirit was necessary to preserve the Messiah from every taint of sin;

3. the virgin birth did not create a person, but a body and a human nature;
4. this human nature was of the substance of Mary, unique and supernatural, consisting of all the elements of our own human nature;
5. Christ's human nature underwent the exact developmental process of physical growth, rational growth, and moral growth just like any other human being;
6. God incarnated was formed by the Holy Spirit.

B. His **baptism** (Matthew 3:13–17)

1. Christ's baptism was a unique event in redemptive history;
2. in it Christ was identifying Himself with John's ministry;
3. He was identifying Himself with Israel and the nation's need to repent;
4. He was identifying Himself with us, as we needed to repent;
5. furthermore, in the Old Testament, prophets, priests, and kings were anointed;
6. with the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Christ (in the form of a dove), the *anointing* for His threefold office of Prophet, Priest, and King is signified;
7. this anointing was also His *ordination* into His threefold work of Prophet, Priest, and King.

C. His **temptation** (Matthew 4:1 "led"; Mark 1:12 "drove"; Luke 4:1 "filled and led")

1. Immediately after His baptism, Jesus is driven and led into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan for forty days;
2. He entered the temptation as the second Adam;
3. the first Adam had an ideal setting—a garden and the second Adam had a hostile setting—a desert;
4. in every way that the first Adam failed the second Adam triumphed;
5. His overcoming temptation, which was real and intense, was not in the energy of His essential deity, but with the anointing and power of the Holy Spirit upon His humanity.

D. His **commencement** of gospel ministry (Luke 4:14–21, “Then Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee...”)

1. After the forty days of temptation in the wilderness, Luke poignantly informs us that Jesus “returned [not in Himself but] in the power of the Spirit;”
2. Jesus then goes to worship in His hometown synagogue at Nazareth;
3. when He stands to read Holy Scripture (being a rabbi), Jesus disrupts the normal Sabbath day reading schedule by deliberately turning to Isaiah 61:1–3, the prophetic passage, which informs that Messiah would be anointed with the Spirit of the LORD;
4. upon completion of the reading, Jesus hands the scroll back to the attendant and announces, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”
5. Messiah commences His ministry under the anointing of the Holy Spirit, which is confirmed by Luke in Acts 10:38: “...how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him.”

E. His **casting out** demons (Matthew 12:22–28)

1. One mark of Messiah was that He would loose captivities and those bound;
2. as He drove out demons, the blinded Pharisees, ignorant of their own Scriptures, accused Jesus of casting out demons by the prince of demons;
3. Christ reasoned with the religious leaders regarding their irrationality;
4. He then declared that He cast out demons “by the Spirit of God;”
5. Could He, in the essence of His deity, not cast out demons with His own divine power? Yes, without a doubt.
6. Why then did He not utilize His native, essential deity instead of the Spirit of God?
7. The short answer is that Jesus wanted to assert that the kingdom of God had come into their midst.

F. His **rejoicing** (Luke 10:21, “In that hour Jesus rejoiced in the Spirit...”)

1. We often think of Jesus as “the Man of sorrows,” which He was most assuredly;

2. however, there is another side of Jesus that is vital to His messianic obedience. He was a man of joy.
 3. when the Seventy returned from their successful mission, Jesus stated that He saw Satan fall like lightning;
 4. it is then that Luke (only) records that Jesus “rejoiced in the Spirit;”
 5. also, as Jesus prepares for His “exodus,” with His apostles in the upper room, He speaks of “(My) joy remaining in them” (John 15:11);
 6. furthermore, the writer of Hebrews reminds us that the Son was “anointed with the oil of gladness” (1:9), and there was a “joy set before him” (12:2) as He made His way to the cross;
 7. thus, the “man of sorrows” was also a man of joy and He was such in the Holy Spirit!
- G. His **atonement** (Hebrews 9:13–14, “who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God”)
1. Atonement can only be understood by three NT words: redemption, reconciliation, propitiation;
 2. it is in the third (propitiation) that the full impact of sin is realized as God’s wrath is poured out;
 3. How could Christ Jesus’ body endure the unmitigated fury and thermos of the cup of wrath of God Almighty?
 4. His body, which was prepared by the Holy Spirit in Mary’s womb, was a real body just like ours:
 5. He was supported in His agony and sustained in His body by the Holy Spirit from being consumed by God’s wrath;
 6. thus, it was through the divine enablement of the Spirit that Jesus offered Himself without spot to God.

“Now all these things being wrought in the human nature of Christ by the Holy Ghost, He is said to offer Himself to God through the eternal Spirit.” (John Owen, Works, vol. 4, pp. 391 ff.)

- H. His **resurrection** (Romans 8:11, “But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you ...”)
1. Who raised Jesus from the dead?
 2. God the Father is said to have raised Jesus (Acts 17:30–31);
 3. Jesus claimed that He would raise Himself from the dead by the authority given by the Father (John 10:17–18);
 4. and here we are taught the Holy Spirit raised Jesus from the dead;
 5. there is a triadic involvement;
 6. of particular importance is that Paul emphatically states that it was the Spirit of God, who superintended Christ’s entombment and brought Him from the grave.
- I. His final **orders and commission** to the Apostles (Acts 1:1–2, “...after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen...”)
1. Gathered with His apostles at Bethany, the risen Christ gave His final orders to be carried out in His absence (Luke 24:50);
 2. known as the Great Commission, Jesus bids them to go into all nations, into Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth (Matthew 24:18–20, Luke 24:46–49, Acts 1:8);
 3. Jesus’ great promise preceding the commission is that “all authority is given to Him in heaven and earth” and this is the authority by which they were to complete their task;
 4. what Luke saliently points out is that Christ gave this final commission not just through His own native and essential deity, but through the authority and power of the Holy Spirit.
- J. His **giving/sending** the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4–5)
1. The first official act of Christ Jesus, upon His enthronement, was to send forth “the Promise of the Father,” the Holy Spirit (in all His fullness) on the Day of Pentecost;
 2. part of this activity was the sovereign distribution of spiritual gifts among men (for Christ’s church) by the Holy Spirit;

3. thus, through the donation of “heaven’s throne gift” to His church, Christ will either baptize a person with the Holy Spirit (i.e., regeneration) or fire (i.e., eternal destruction in the Lake of Fire);
4. Jesus ascended into heaven and (along with the Father) sent the Holy Spirit back to earth effectually to apply His accomplished work as Mediator (see LBC, 10:1–2).
- 5) The connection between Christ and the Holy Spirit, from birth to ascension, is now complete.

The Messiah, according to the Baptist, was to baptize with the Spirit and with fire (Matt. 3:11), which places Him in a different category from the Old Testament judges and prophets. The authority to give the Spirit was the culminating point of Christ’s exaltation ... that He should pour out the Spirit of grace and supplication (Zech. 12:10). (Smeaton, p. 46)

II. Why Was the Holy Spirit Necessary in the Person & Work of Christ?

QUESTION: Since Jesus was God incarnated, God manifested in the flesh, why was it necessary for Him to be “sanctified and anointed,” filled, and endowed with the Holy Spirit and His power?

- A. To teach the intra-connection and essential equality of the ontological Trinity.
- B. To display the Trinitarian outworking of the Covenant of Redemption.

NOTE: The Father was the Planner, the Son was the Accomplisher, but the Holy Spirit was the divine Administrator of the Covenant of Redemption through the Covenant of Grace!

- C. To demonstrate that He was one of and in the succession of the OT prophets.
- D. To fulfill Scripture (Isaiah 61:1 ff., cf. Luke 4:14–21).
- E. To show the necessary and requisite signs that would accompany Messiah—Matthew 11:2–6.
- F. To exhibit that Christ (the anointed one) was one of us, one among us, and most importantly, one for us.
- G. To enable Christ, in His humanity, to “be thoroughly furnished to execute the office of mediator and surety” (LBC, 8:3).

Our Lord needed the Spirit as a real equipment of His human nature for the execution of His Messianic task. (Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology*, p. 321)

H. To keep us dependent upon this sovereign Holy Spirit in our lives and labors.

This was the anointing for His future work, the anointing of the Prophet, the Priest, and the King, of which all the ceremonial anointing of Levitical ordinance was but a type. Thus He entered upon His threefold ministry, and if it was necessary for Him so to be endued ere He commenced the work committed to Him, how much more so is it necessary for His disciples? (Holden, p. 51)

CONCLUSION:

Our Baptist forefathers, following the teachings of Holy Scripture, bequeathed a body of divinity to their children. In Chapter 8, “Of Christ the Mediator,” they model a Christocentrism that is desperately needed today. And a much overlooked point is this: if God incarnate, in His humanity, needed the Holy Spirit in His life and ministry, how much more so do we?

VIII. OF CHRIST THE MEDIATOR

8:1 It pleased God, in His eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus, His only begotten Son, according to the covenant made between them both, to be the mediator between God and man; [a] the prophet, [b] priest, [c] and king; [d] head and Savior of His church, [e] the heir of all things, [f] and judge of the world; [g] unto whom He did from all eternity give a people to be His seed and to be by Him in time redeemed, called, justified, sanctified, and glorified [h].

[a] Isaiah 42:1; 1 Peter 1:19,20 [b] Acts 3:22 [c] Hebrews 5:5,6 [d] Psalm 2:6; Luke 1:33

[e] Ephesians 1:22,23 [f] Hebrews 1:2 [g] Acts 17:31 [h] Isaiah 53:10; John 17:6; Romans 8:30

8:2 The Son of God, the second person in the Holy Trinity, being very and eternal God, the brightness of the Father’s glory, of one substance and equal with Him who made the world, who upholds and governs all things He has made, did, when the fullness of time was complete, take upon Him man’s nature, with all the essential properties and common infirmities thereof, [i] yet without sin; [k] being conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, the Holy Spirit coming down upon her: and the power of the Most High overshadowing her; and so was made of a woman of the tribe of Judah, of the seed of Abraham and David according to the Scriptures; [l] so that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition,

or confusion; which person is very God and very man, yet one Christ, the only mediator between God and man [m].

[i] John 1:14; Galatians 4:4 [k] Romans 8:3; Hebrews 2:14–17, 4:15 [l] Matthew 1:22,23; Luke 1:27,31,35 [m] Romans 9:5; 1 Timothy 2:5

8:3 The Lord Jesus, in His human nature thus united to the divine, in the person of the Son, was sanctified and anointed with the Holy Spirit above measure, [n] having in Him all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge; [o] in whom it pleased the Father that all fullness should dwell, [p] to the end that being holy, harmless, undefiled, [q] and full of grace and truth, [r] He might be thoroughly furnished to execute the office of mediator and surety; [s] which office He took not upon Himself, but was thereunto called by His Father; [t] who also put all power and judgment in His hand, and gave Him commandment to execute the same [u].

[n] Psalm 45:7; Acts 10:38; John 3:34 [o] Colossians 2:3 [p] Colossians 1:19 [q] Hebrews 7:26 [r] John 1:14 [s] Hebrews 7:22 [t] Hebrews 5:5 [u] John 5:22,27; Matthew 28:18; Acts 2:36

8:4 This office the Lord Jesus did most willingly undertake, [x] which that He might discharge He was made under the law, [y] and did perfectly fulfill it, and underwent the punishment due to us, which we should have born and suffered, [z] being made sin and a curse for us; [a] enduring most grievous sorrows in His soul, and most painful sufferings in His body; [b] was crucified, and died, and remained in the state of the dead, yet saw no corruption: [c] on the third day He arose from the dead [d] with the same body in which He suffered, [e] with which He also ascended into heaven, [f] and there sits at the right hand of His Father making intercession, [g] and shall return to judge men and angels at the end of the world [h].

[x] Psalm 40:7,8; Hebrews 10:5–10; John 10:18 [y] Galatians 4:4; Matthew 3:15 [z] Galatians 3:13; Isaiah 53:6; 1 Peter 3:18 [a] 2 Corinthians 5:21 [b] Matthew 26:37,38; Luke 22:44; Matthew 27:46 [c] Acts 13:37 [d] 1 Corinthians 15:3,4 [e] John 20:25,27 [f] Mark 16:19; Acts 1:9–11 [g] Romans 8:34; Hebrews 9:24 [h] Acts 10:42; Romans 14:9,10; Acts 1:11; 2 Peter 2:4

8:5 The Lord Jesus, by His perfect obedience and sacrifice of Himself, which He through the eternal Spirit once offered up to God, has fully satisfied the justice of God, [i] procured reconciliation, and purchased an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven, for all those whom the Father has given unto Him [k].

[i] Hebrews 9:14, 10:14; Romans 3:25,26 [k] John 17:2; Hebrews 9:15

8:6 Although the price of redemption was not actually paid by Christ until after His incarnation, yet the virtue, efficacy, and benefit thereof were communicated to the elect in all ages, successively from the beginning of the world, in and by those promises, types, and sacrifices wherein He was revealed, and signified to be the seed which should bruise the serpent's head; [l] and the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world, [m] being the same yesterday, and today and forever [n].

[l] 1 Corinthians 4:10; Hebrews 4:2; 1 Peter 1:10,11 [m] Revelation 13:8 [n] Hebrews 13:8

8:7 Christ, in the work of mediation, acts according to both natures, by each nature doing that which is proper to itself; yet by reason of the unity of the person, that which is proper to one nature is sometimes in Scripture, attributed to the person denominated by the other nature [o].

[o] John 3:13; Acts 20:28

8:8 To all those for whom Christ has obtained eternal redemption, He does certainly and effectually apply and communicate the same, making intercession for them; [p] uniting them to Himself by His Spirit, revealing to them, in and by His Word, the mystery of salvation, persuading them to believe and obey, [q] governing their hearts by His Word and Spirit, [r] and overcoming all their enemies by His almighty power and wisdom, [s] in such manner and ways as are most consonant to His wonderful and unsearchable dispensation; and all of free and absolute grace, without any condition foreseen in them to procure it [t].

[p] John 6:37, 10:15,16, 17:9; Romans 5:10 [q] John 17:6; Ephesians 1:9; 1 John 5:20

[r] Romans 8:9,14 [s] Psalm 110:1; 1 Corinthians 15:25,26 [t] John 3:8; Ephesians 1:8

8:9 This office of mediator between God and man is proper only to Christ, who is the prophet, priest, and king of the church of God; and may not be either in whole, or any part thereof, transferred from Him to any other [u].

[u] 1 Timothy 2:5

8:10 This number and order of offices is necessary; for in respect of our ignorance, we stand in need of His prophetic office; [x] and in respect of our alienation from God, and imperfection of the best of our services, we need His priestly office to reconcile us and present us acceptable unto God; [y] and in respect to our averseness and utter inability to

return to God, and for our rescue and security from our spiritual adversaries, we need His kingly office to convince, subdue, draw, uphold, deliver, and preserve us to His heavenly kingdom [z].

[x] John 1:18 [y] Colossians 1:21; Galatians 5:17 [z] John 16:8; Psalm 110:3; Luke 1:74,75

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NOTES:

1 For preaching purposes, I simply refer the hearer to Samuel E. Waldron's excellent work *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith* (Evangelical Press: Darlington, England; 2005). Along with an exposition, Waldron gives a concise outline and summary of Chapter 8 "Of Christ the mediator" (pp. 123–137).



Tom Ascol

1689 Confession Outline

Chapter 26

Of the Local Church

Introduction:

There are two problems that greatly afflict the church of Jesus Christ in the world today. First, the widespread lack of spiritual vitality that characterizes many congregations. While there are obvious exceptions, liberalism, humanism, modernism and post-modernism have played their part in the service of our sworn enemies, the world, the flesh and the devil.

In addition to the lack of spirituality is the low opinion that so many today have of the church of Christ. This is true not only of the world in general (which is expected), but also of professing Christians. Many parachurch organizations generate more respect and loyalty from Christians than the church does. Church membership is increasingly regarded as irrelevant if not completely unbiblical. Many Christians think that they can faithfully follow Christ on their own, or while being only tangentially associated with a church.

In the face of such realities the need to reexamine what Scripture teaches about the role of the church is vitally important. One helpful guide in such a process is chapter 26 of the *Second London Confession of Faith*.

The first four paragraphs of this chapter describe the church of Jesus Christ across history and around the world. After affirming what the New Testament teaches about the universal

church, the confession shifts its focus to the local expressions of Christ's body which are commonly called local churches. The bulk of the chapter (eleven paragraphs) is given to this subject, which is very appropriate since the bulk of the New Testament's teaching centers upon the local church.

The doctrine of the local church can be considered under five broad categories of New Testament teaching.

I. The Origin of a Local Church (paragraph 5):

In the execution of this power wherewith he is so intrusted, the Lord Jesus calleth out of the world unto himself, through the ministry of his word, by his Spirit, those that are given unto him by his Father, that they may walk before him in all the ways of obedience, which he prescribeth to them in his word. Those thus called, he commandeth to walk together in particular societies, or churches, for their mutual edification, and the due performance of that public worship, which he requireth of them in the world. (John 10:16; John 12:32. Matt. 28:20. Matt. 28:15–20)

A. Jesus Christ is the only proper “church planter”

1. He calls people “out of the world” to Himself (John 10:16)
 - a. This is the call to salvation
 - b. He does this by His Word and Spirit (through the proclamation of His gospel; i.e. the effectual call (see chapter 10 of the confession)
2. He calls the elect (“those that are given unto him by his Father”) to a life of obedience. Matthew 28:20, “teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you.”
3. He commands believers to live together in local churches (“particular societies”)
 - a. This (a local church) is the context in which believers are to be taught “*to observe...*”
 - b. Matthew 18:15–20— Jesus instructs a local church on how to correct an impenitent member
 - c. This understanding is demonstrated by the work of the apostles in the Book of Acts.

- 1) They preached; gathered converts into churches – Acts 17:3, 4; 1 Thessalonians 1:1
 - 2) They appointed leaders in the churches to carry out the teaching ministry – Acts 15:3, 4, 22; 1 Thessalonians 4:12
- B. The local church is indispensable to the great commission—Believers cannot be taught to observe all the Christ has commanded outside of faithfulness to a local church.

II. The Membership of a Local Church (paragraph 6):

The members of these churches are saints by calling, visibly manifesting and evidencing (in and by their profession and walking) their obedience unto that call of Christ; and do willingly consent to walk together, according to the appointment of Christ; giving up themselves to the Lord, and one to another, by the will of God, in professed subjection to the ordinances of the Gospel. (Rom. 11:7; 1 Cor. 1:2. Acts 2:41,42; 5:13,14; 2 Cor. 9:13)

- A. Members must be converted—“saints by calling”
1. Disciples; those who have received the gospel
 2. Baptized—evidence of their discipleship by giving themselves up to the Lord by the will of God “in professed subjection to the ordinances of the Gospel”
- B. Members voluntarily unite—“do willingly consent to walk together”
1. Not by state mandate
 2. Not by inheritance (ie. bloodlines)
- C. Members covenant together—“giving up themselves to the Lord, and one to another...”
1. Mutual commitment to one another
 2. Agreement to serve the Lord together—Acts 2:41–42, exemplifies this spirit and commitment (cf. Acts 4:33–35)

III. The Authority of a Local Church (paragraph 7):

To each of these churches thus gathered, according to his mind declared in his word, he hath given all that power and authority, which is in any way needful for their carrying on that

order in worship and discipline, which he hath instituted for them to observe; with commands and rules for the due and right exerting, and executing of that power. (Matt. 28:17,18; 1 Cor. 5:4,5; 5:13; 2 Cor. 2: 6-8.)

- A. Jesus Christ invests His own authority in a duly organized, biblically ordered church. — This is seen in Matthew 18:18–20; 1 Corinthians 5:1–13 (especially vv. 4–5)
- B. Each local church is autonomous and independent — The churches in Asia Minor (Revelation 2–3) demonstrate this. Christ exhorts them about discipline, but He does not suggest that the entire group of churches is responsible for each other's discipline cases.
- C. Each church is responsible to follow the rules of Christ is exercising this authority

APPLICATION: The fact that Jesus has vested His own authority in a biblically ordered church ought to make His disciples have great respect and regard for the church. Those who reject the teaching and authority of such a church are actually rejecting the teaching and authority of Jesus Christ.

IV. The Government of a Local Church (paragraphs 8–13)

- A. The basic composition of a church is found it is officers and members (8–9):

A particular church, gathered and completely organized according to the mind of Christ, consists of officers and members; and the officers appointed by Christ to be chosen and set apart by the church (so called and gathered), for the peculiar administration of ordinances, and execution of power or duty, which he intrusts them with, or calls them to, to be continued to the end of the world, are bishops or elders, and deacons. (Acts xx. 17,28; Phil. i. 1).

The way appointed by Christ for the calling of any person, fitted and gifted by the Holy Spirit, unto the office of bishop or elder in a church, is, that he be chosen thereunto by the common suffrage of the church itself; and solemnly set apart by fasting and prayer, with imposition of hands of the eldership of the church, if there be any before constituted therein; and of a deacon that he be chosen by the like suffrage, and set apart by prayer, and the like imposition of hands. (Acts 14:23; 1 Timothy 4:14; Acts 6:3, 5, 6)

- 1. Members, as already noted, are to be converted, baptized, covenanted believers

2. Officers

- a. Who are they? — “bishops or elders and deacons” — Only two ordinary, ongoing offices
 - Philippians 1:1
 - 1 Timothy 3:1–13
- b. How does a member become an officer?
 - “The way appointed by Christ” — how officers are to be recognized
 - 1) A man must be “fitted and gifted by the Holy Spirit”
 - a) He needs to meet the character qualifications spelled out in 1 Timothy 3:1–7, Titus 1:5–11, etc. for an elder and Acts 6:1–6 and 1 Timothy 3:8–13 for a deacon.
 - b) He must have recognized ability — recognized by the church
 - 2) A man must be “chosen and set apart by the church;” this is a congregational decision
 - The general process to follow is given in paragraph 9

APPLICATION: The confession emphasizes two ingredients in the recognition and calling of elders (bishops) and deacons. There should be both an internal and an external call. The internal call is that sense within a man that the Lord has gifted him to serve as an officer and has granted him a “desire” for the work (1 Timothy 3:1). Mere desire is not enough, but desire joined with gifting with a sense of meeting the character qualifications in a realistic manner.

In addition to the internal call there is the external call, indicated in the confession by referring to the “common suffrage of the church itself.” In other words, a man should not be imposed on the congregation as an officer, nor should he impose himself.

B. The basic means of governing the church is the ministry of the Word (paragraphs 10–11)

The church is to be ruled by the Word of God. The responsibility of its officers is to see to it that the ministry of the Word continues. This is demonstrated in Acts 6:1–4 where the purpose of the first deacons is expressed in terms of protecting the ministry of the Word.

- Such ministry of the Word is to be carried out by what Sam Waldron calls both the “official” and “auxiliary” ministry of the Word in the church

1. The official ministry of the Word is conducted by pastors (paragraph 10):

The work of pastors being constantly to attend the service of Christ, in his churches, in the ministry of the word and prayer, with watching for their souls, as they that must give an account to Him; it is incumbent on the churches to whom they minister, not only to give them all due respect, but also to communicate to them of all their good things, according to their ability, so as they may have a comfortable supply, without being themselves entangled in secular affairs; and may also be capable of exercising hospitality towards others; and this is required by the law of nature, and by the express order of our Lord Jesus, who hath ordained that they preach the Gospel should live of the Gospel. (Acts vi. 4; Heb. xiii. 17. 1 Tim. v. 17,18; Gal. vi. 6,7. 2 Tim. ii. 4. 1 Tim. iii. 2. 1 Cor. ix. 6-14).

- a. Pastors are called to carry out this ministry on regular basis
- b. Churches are called to support financially their pastors “according to their ability” — 1 Timothy 5:17–18

2. The auxiliary ministry of the Word is conducted by other able men (paragraph 11):

Although it be incumbent on the bishops or pastors of the churches, to be instant in preaching the word, by way of office, yet the work of preaching the word is not so peculiarly confined to them but that others also gifted and fitted by the Holy Spirit for it, and approved and called by the church, may and ought to perform it. (Acts 11:19-21; 1 Peter 4:10, 11)

APPLICATION: This means that, under the general oversight of the elders, men other than elders/pastors may also preach and teach in the church.

C. The extent of the church’s government extends as far as its membership (paragraph 12):

As all believers are bound to join themselves to particular churches, when and where they have opportunity so to do; so all that are admitted unto the privileges of a church, are also under the censures and government thereof, according to the rule of Christ. (1 Thess. 5:14; 2 Thess. 3: 6,14,15).

- The basic point is church discipline extends to all church members and all church problems.

APPLICATION: Every Christian should submit to the oversight of a local church as a part of discipleship. It is “according to the rule of Christ” for Christians to be so united to—and submitted to—a local church.

ILLUSTRATION: An excellent book that elaborates this point is by Jonathan Leeman, called *Church Membership* (Crossway, 9Marks imprint). Leeman likens a Christian’s relationship to a local church as a citizen to an embassy in a foreign land. The embassy is an outpost of the homeland and the citizen is to relate to the authorities in the embassy as representatives of the duly appointed authorities of his homeland. Thus church membership is not so much joining as one would join a club or society, as it is submitting as one would upon becoming a citizen of a new country.

D. Every member should highly esteem the church and its government (paragraph 13):

No church members, upon any offence taken by them, having performed their duty required of them towards the person they are offended at, ought to disturb church-order, or absent themselves from the assemblies of the church, or administration of any ordinances, upon the account of such offence at any of their fellow members, but to wait upon Christ, in the further proceeding of the church. (Matt. 28: 15-17; Eph.4: 2,3).

1. No Christian should willingly disturb the peace and unity of the church when troubles arise.
2. Every Christian—church member—must recognize the importance of the church and the seriousness of disturbing its peace.
3. Instead of seeking to vindicate oneself, even when offended, church members must wait on Christ to resolve the issue.
 - a. He is the Head of the church
 - b. He will vindicate His cause and His people
 - c. He rules over the elders
 - d. Do not forget the presence of the risen Christ in the church. Therefore follow His rules and patiently wait on Him; exercise faith!

APPLICATION: This section highlights the seriousness of schism, divisiveness in a church. Too often today offended church members take their pain as a justification to leave the church or to go on a campaign to gather supporters against the offending party. Such is contrary to the Word of God and the Spirit of Christ.

V. The communion of local churches with each other (paragraphs 14–15):

As each church, and all the members of it, are bound to pray continually for the good and prosperity of all the churches of Christ, in all places, and upon all occasions to further every one within the bounds of their places and callings, in the exercise of their gifts and graces, so the churches, when planted by the providence of God, so as they may enjoy opportunity and advantage for it, ought to hold communion among themselves, for their peace, increase of love, and mutual edification. (Eph. 6: 18; Ps. 122: 6. Rom. 16: 1,2; 3 John 8–10).

A. Churches should pray for each other (“are bound to pray continually for the good and prosperity of all the churches of Christ”)

1. This is a helpful antidote to pride and sectarianism
2. It is instructive to church members to hear other congregations prayed for by name
3. It communicates to unbelievers a unity—at least at some level—that every church of the Lord Jesus has with all other such churches

B. Churches and individual Christians are to encourage one another

C. Churches, when planted in regions where they have opportunity to “hold communion” with other churches, ought to do so—fellowship and cooperate

1. This, together with paragraph 15, is the “associational principle”
2. It is taken from the *Savoy Platform of Polity* word for word
3. It is also built on the same conviction expressed in the 1st *London Baptist Confession*, Article 37:

And Although the particular Congregations be distinct and severall Bodies, every one a compact and knit Citie in it selfe; yet are they all to walk by one and the same Rule, and by all meanes convenient to have the counsell and help one of another in all needfull affaires of the Church, as members of one body in the common faith under Christ their onely head” (Lumpkin, 168-69).

D. When difficulties or disruptions occur in a church or among churches, many churches should send messengers to consider the matter and give advice (paragraph 15):

In cases of difficulties or differences, either in point of doctrine or administration, wherein either the churches in general are concerned, or any one church, in their peace, union, and edification; or any member or members of any church are injured, in or by any proceedings in censures not agreeable to truth and order: it is according to the mind of Christ, that many churches holding communion together, do, by their messengers, meet to consider, and give their advice in or about that matter in difference, to be reported to all the churches concerned; howbeit these messengers assembled, are not intrusted with any jurisdiction over the churches themselves, to exercise any censures either over any churches or persons; or to impose their determination on the churches or officers. (Acts xv. 2–6,22,23,25. 2 Cor. i. 24; 1 John iv. 1).

1. Local churches should call on one another for help (in difficult cases, when outside counsel is needed)
2. The autonomy of each church is protected while the benefit of the wisdom of many churches is afforded
 - a. Though independent a church should not be isolated
 - b. There is a recognition of interdependence among sister churches that are each fully autonomous

EXPOSITION: The nature of this “holding communion” has been the subject of no small debate in recent years. The main question is the nature of associationalism. Some recognize the confession requiring a formal association of churches whereas others see the confessional position being satisfied by informal association. It is unlikely that this debate will be resolved anytime soon to widespread satisfaction of those holding to the 1689.

CONCLUSION: The confession highlights the biblical emphasis on the importance of local churches in the mission of God and the life of discipleship. When a person becomes a follower of Jesus no small part of that commitment is to take membership in a local church seriously. Each member is called by Christ to be faithful in using gifts, serving the cause of Christ and encouraging others to do the same. Each member shares the responsibility of the whole church to fulfill its ministry to the world by preaching the gospel and bearing witness to the truth and power of the gospel in the way that he lives with other believers in the body.

XXVI. OF THE CHURCH

26:1 The catholic or universal church, which (with respect to the internal work of the Spirit and truth of grace) may be called invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ, the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of him that fills all in all [a].

[a] Hebrews 12:23; Colossians 1:18; Ephesians 1:10,22,23; 5:23,27,32

26:2 All persons throughout the world, professing the faith of the gospel, and obedience unto God by Christ according unto it, not destroying their own profession by any errors everting the foundation, or unholiness of conversation, are and may be called visible saints; [b] and of such ought all particular congregations to be constituted [c].

[b] 1 Corinthians 1:2; Acts 11:26 [c] Romans 1:7; Ephesians 1:20–22

26:3 The purest churches under heaven are subject to mixture and error; [d] and some have so degenerated as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan; [e] nevertheless Christ always has had, and ever shall have a kingdom in this world, to the end thereof, of such as believe in Him, and make profession of His name [f].

[d] 1 Corinthians 5; Revelation 2,3 [e] Revelation 18:2; 2 Thessalonians 2:11,12 [f] Matthew 16:18; Psalm 72:17, 102:28; Revelation 12:17

26:4 The Lord Jesus Christ is the Head of the church, in whom, by the appointment of the Father, all power for the calling, institution, order or government of the church, is invested in a supreme and sovereign manner; [g] neither can the Pope of Rome in any sense be head thereof, but is that antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition, that exalts himself in the church against Christ, and all that is called God; whom the Lord shall destroy with the brightness of His coming [h].

[g] Colossians 1:18; Matthew 28:18–20; Ephesians 4:11,12 [h] 2 Thessalonians 2:2–9

26:5 In the execution of this power wherewith he is so intrusted, the Lord Jesus calls out of the world unto Himself, through the ministry of His Word, by His Spirit, those that are given unto Him by His Father, [i] that they may walk before Him in all the ways of obedience, which He prescribes to them in His Word [k]. Those thus called, He commands to walk together in particular societies, or churches, for their mutual edification, and the due performance of that public worship, which He requires of them in the world [l].

[i] John 10:16; John 12:32 [k] Matthew 28:20 [l] Matthew 18:15–20

26:6 The members of these churches are saints by calling, visibly manifesting and evidencing (in and by their profession and walking) their obedience unto that call of Christ; [m] and do willingly consent to walk together, according to the appointment of Christ; giving up themselves to the Lord, and one to another, by the will of God, in professed subjection to the ordinances of the Gospel [n].

[m] Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:2 [n] Acts 2:41,42, 5:13,14; 2 Corinthians 9:13

26:7 To each of these churches thus gathered, according to His mind declared in His Word, He has given all that power and authority, which is in any way needful for their carrying on that order in worship and discipline, which He has instituted for them to observe; with commands and rules for the due and right exerting, and executing of that power [o].

[o] Matthew 18:17,18; 1 Corinthians 5:4, 5, 5:13, 2 Corinthians 2:6–8

26:8 A particular church, gathered and completely organized according to the mind of Christ, consists of officers and members; and the officers appointed by Christ to be chosen and set apart by the church (so called and gathered), for the peculiar administration of ordinances, and execution of power or duty, which he entrusts them with, or calls them to, to be continued to the end of the world, are bishops or elders, and deacons [p].

[p] Acts 20:17, 28; Philippians 1:1

26:9 The way appointed by Christ for the calling of any person, fitted and gifted by the Holy Spirit, unto the office of bishop or elder in a church, is, that he be chosen thereunto by the common suffrage of the church itself; [q] and solemnly set apart by fasting and prayer, with imposition of hands of the eldership of the church, if there be any before constituted therein; [r] and of a deacon that he be chosen by the like suffrage, and set apart by prayer, and the like imposition of hands [s].

[q] Acts 14:23 [r] 1 Timothy 4:14 [s] Acts 6:3,5,6

26:10 The work of pastors being constantly to attend the service of Christ, in His churches, in the ministry of the word and prayer, with watching for their souls, as they that must give an account to Him; [t] it is incumbent on the churches to whom they minister,

not only to give them all due respect, but also to communicate to them of all their good things according to their ability, [u] so as they may have a comfortable supply, without being themselves entangled in secular affairs; [x] and may also be capable of exercising hospitality towards others; [y] and this is required by the law of nature, and by the express order of our Lord Jesus, who has ordained that they that preach the Gospel should live of the Gospel [z].

[t] Acts 6:4; Hebrews 13:17 [u] 1 Timothy 5:17,18; Galatians 6:6,7 [x] 2 Timothy 2:4 [y] 1 Timothy 3:2 [z] 1 Corinthians 9:6–14

26:11 Although it be incumbent on the bishops or pastors of the churches, to be instant in preaching the Word, by way of office, yet the work of preaching the word is not so peculiarly confined to them but that others also gifted and fitted by the Holy Spirit for it, and approved and called by the church, may and ought to perform it [a].

[a] Acts 11:19–21; 1 Peter 4:10,11

26:12 As all believers are bound to join themselves to particular churches, when and where they have opportunity so to do; so all that are admitted unto the privileges of a church, are also under the censures and government thereof, according to the rule of Christ [b].

[b] 1 Thessalonians 5:14; 2 Thessalonians 3:6,14,15

26:13 No church members, upon any offense taken by them, having performed their duty required of them towards the person they are offended at, ought to disturb any church-order, or absent themselves from the assemblies of the church, or administration of any ordinances, upon the account of such offense at any of their fellow members, but to wait upon Christ, in the further proceeding of the church [c].

[c] Matthew 18:15–17; Ephesians 4:2,3

26:14. As each church, and all the members of it, are bound to pray continually for the good and prosperity of all the churches of Christ, [d] in all places, and upon all occasions to further every one within the bounds of their places and callings, in the exercise of their gifts and graces, so the churches, when planted by the providence of God, so as they may enjoy opportunity and advantage for it, ought to hold communion among themselves, for their peace, increase of love, and mutual edification [e].

[d] Ephesians 6:18; Psalm 122:6 [e] Romans 16:1,2; 3 John 8–10

26:15 In cases of difficulties or differences, either in point of doctrine or administration, wherein either the churches in general are concerned, or any one church, in their peace, union, and edification; or any member or members of any church are injured, in or by any proceedings in censures not agreeable to truth and order: it is according to the mind of Christ, that many churches holding communion together, do, by their messengers, meet to consider, and give their advice in or about that matter in difference, to be reported to all the churches concerned; [f] howbeit these messengers assembled, are not entrusted with any church-power properly so called; or with any jurisdiction over the churches themselves, to exercise any censures either over any churches or persons; or to impose their determination on the churches or officers [g].

[f] Acts 15:2,4,6,22,23,25 [g] 2 Corinthians 1:24; 1 John 4:1

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Jeff Johnson

1689 Confession Outline

Chapter 3

The Decrees of God

Introduction:

- What are the decrees of God?
- Chapter 3 of our confession provides us with a clear and biblical answer.
- The first paragraph defines the nature of God's decrees; the following six paragraphs explain, qualify, and apply this doctrine for our own spiritual growth and nourishment.
- Not only does this chapter supply a positive answer to our question, it makes sure that we understand the proper and improper implications of this doctrine.
- It answers common objections, makes sure we see the connection between God's decrees and divine election, and that we do not draw the false conclusion of fatalism—the notion that eliminates human responsibility and makes God the author of evil.
- Because of the potential of misunderstanding, being puffed up with pride, and becoming contentious, this chapter ends by reminding us that we need to handle this doctrine with care.

- The doctrine of God's decrees is a precious and historical teaching that needs to be professed, protected, and proclaimed, but done so in a spirit of humility and meekness.
- And it is upon this last note that we want to begin our exposition of this great chapter.

The Decrees of God

I. The Nature of God's Decrees, P1

P1: God hath decreed in himself, from all eternity, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably, all things, whatsoever comes to pass; yet so as thereby is God neither the author of sin nor hath fellowship with any therein; nor is violence offered to the will of the creature, nor yet is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established; in which appears His wisdom in disposing all things, and power and faithfulness in accomplishing His decree.

A. God's Decrees Originate Exclusively within God Himself (*God hath decreed in himself,*)

- From this phrase we infer two theological truths:
 1. God's decrees originated from within Himself without any external considerations
 2. God's decrees are based upon the nature of God
- It is vital that we properly understand the nature of God (chapter 2 of our confession) in order to understand the decrees of God.
- God's decrees are eternal, wise, holy, free, and unchangeable because God is eternal, wise, holy, autonomous, and immutable.
- As our confession goes on to explain:

B. God's Decrees are Eternal (*from all eternity,*)

- Ephesians 3:11 This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord
- Because God is eternal, his decrees are eternal.

C. God's Decrees are Determined by His Own Will as Expressions of His Character.

1. God's Will is Wise (*by the most wise*)

- Having all wisdom, God's decrees are perfect.

2. God's Will is Holy (*and holy counsel*)

- Given their origin, means of execution, and end all His decrees, including that of the fall of man, are holy.

3. God's Will is Free (*of His own will, freely*)

- It is important to note that just because God's decrees are rooted in His nature they are not essential to His nature.
- Because the triune God is completely self-sufficient and eternally happy with himself, He was under no internal or external impulse or obligation to issue out His decrees.
- Rather, He freely chose to decree according to His own good pleasure.
- It is vital to keep God's creative and sustaining powers of the universe, which begins with God's eternal decrees, separate from the existence and being of God—to confuse the two leads to pantheism and panentheism.

4. God's Will is Unchangeable (*and unchangeably*)

- Psalm 33:11 the plans of the Lord stand firm forever
- If God's decrees eternally originated within His own immutable nature by the wisdom of His own counsel, then they must be perfect and unchangeable—otherwise God fails to be all-wise, immutable, and all-powerful.
- Because God is sovereign over all powers and authorities, nothing can alter, even in the slightest degree, the plans of God
- Isaiah. 46:10 Declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, "My counsel shall stand, And I will accomplish all my purpose."
- Isaiah 14:24 The LORD of hosts has sworn: "As I have planned, so shall it be, and as I have purposed, so shall it stand,"

- 1) Before the foundation of the world, God determined everything that takes place in history: for His counsel shall stand.
- 2) No one can say to Him, "What are you doing?" (Daniel 4:35).
- 3) For does not the potter have the right to do what he wants with his own clay (Romans 9:21)?
- 4) And does the hammer have the right to say to him who wields it, "don't swing me here or there" (Isaiah 10:15)?
- 5) Of course not, He is God and He does all things according to His own pleasure (Ephesians 1:11).

D. God Decrees All Things (*all things, whatsoever comes to pass;*)

- Isaiah 46:9–10 remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, "My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,"
- Ephesians 1:11 In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will,
- Hebrews 6:17 So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath,
- By virtue of God's nature, God's decrees include everything that shall come to pass in time.
- As it is written, God works "all things according to the counsel of his will" (Ephesians 1:11).
- He has predetermined everything from the number of hairs upon each of our heads (Matthew 10:30) to the timing of each little sparrow that falls from the sky (Matthew 10:29).
- He ordained the rise and fall of nations of the world, and the rise and fall of the birds of the air (Daniel 2:21).
- God has appointed when and where each of us is born into this world (Acts

17:26); and he has determined when each of us would depart from this world (Hebrews 9:27).

- Not one blade of grass is blown about by the wind without being obedient to God's eternal counsel.

E. God's Decrees Do Not Make God the Author of Sin

1. God's Decrees Do Not Directly Connect Him with Sin (*yet so as thereby is God neither the author of sin nor hath fellowship with any therein;*)

- Though God freely and eternally decreed everything that takes place in history, even the wrath of Pharaoh, God is not the author of sin.
- Sin comes from within us.
- James 1:13 Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.
- God is holy, and He cannot deny himself (2 Timothy 2:13).
- God is too holy to even look upon sin, how much more to have fellowship with darkness.
- 1 John 1:5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

2. God's Decrees Do Not Violate the Freedom of Men (*nor is violence offered to the will of the creature,*)

- But how can a holy God be the author of world history without also being the author of all the evil throughout world history?
- Like the incarnation and the Trinity, this revealed doctrine of decrees is difficult, but the confession reflects the position of the biblical material in affirming "nor is violence offered to the will of the creature."
- Evil originates within the heart of men (James 1:14), and God's decrees do not violate, manipulate, or internally control the hearts of men.
- Though the heart of sinful man is in the hands of the Lord and the Lord turns it wherever He wishes, He does so without doing violence to the will of men.
- This distinction is made clear in what follows in our confession.

3. God's Decrees Establish Secondary Causes (*nor yet is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established;*)
- This is further explained by the words that follow: “nor yet is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.”
 - Unlike pantheism (where God and the universe are one and the actions of men are a direct manifestation of divine activity), God and the universe remain separate and distinct entities.
 - God has ordained, created, and equipped the universe with the laws of nature and He has endowed man with the freedom of violation.
 - God, as the first cause, has ordained and created the universe to operate in an orderly and precise fashion and man to operate in accordance to their nature as secondary causes.
 - As secondary causes, gravity does what gravity does, dogs do what dogs do, and men will act the way man act—everything according to their established laws and their established/fallen natures.
 - As the first cause, God governs all things according to His own counsel and purpose, but does so in a way that does not violate the laws of nature or the volition of man.
 - Louis Berkhof: “In the physical world He has established the laws of nature, and it is by means of these laws that He administers the government of the physical universe.”¹
 - Thus, the direct power of God and the indirect powers of nature cooperate and work together without mixture and confusion.
 - John 19:11 Jesus answered him, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin.”
 - Theologically, this is known as *concurrency*. Louis Berkhof:
“Concurrency may be defined as the cooperation of the divine power with all subordinate powers, according to the pre-established laws of their operation, causing them to act and to act precisely as they do.”²

- This means that we are responsible for our own sin, but because God controls the restraints that He places upon us, nothing can occur, such as sin, without His permissive and decretive will.
4. God's Decrees Demonstrate the Wisdom of God (*in which appears His wisdom in disposing all things, and power and faithfulness in accomplishing His decree.*)
- The final piece that is needed to explain how this all works together is found in the last phrase: "in which appears His wisdom in disposing all things, and power and faithfulness in accomplishing His decree."
 - We must remember that God's decrees are holy because they each work together for His own glory.
 - Everything, including every sin, collates together for a single purpose—a purpose that will bring glory to God's wisdom, power, and faithfulness.
 - He has a single plan (i.e., the plan of redemption) in which all things work together to bring Him glory (Psalm 76:10).
 - This means that God did not decree any isolated, random, and purposeless events.
- 1) For instance, this can be seen in the greatest evil that has ever taken place in the history of mankind—the death of Jesus.
 - 2) The Apostle Peter had the boldness afterwards to look at the Jews and say, "this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men" (Acts 2:23).
 - 3) This is an amazing accusation, for Peter acknowledged that Christ was the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world when he said that Christ was "delivered up according the definite plan and foreknowledge of God."
 - 4) How can Peter claim that God decreed the death of Christ, and then turn around and blame the Jews for murdering him: "you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men"?
 - 5) In other words, how can God cease to be the author of sin if He is the one who decreed the death of His Son?

- 6) As the first cause, God ordained the death of His only Son out of love for His people and for the sake of upholding His own righteous.
- 7) God was executing justice for sin when He poured out His wrath on Christ on the cross.
- 8) Therefore, God cannot be charged with murder or with guilt, for God's purpose was to condemn sin and uphold His own moral law.
- 9) God was making sure His goodness and justice was upheld while providing salvation for guilty sinners.
- 10) The eternal purpose of God in sending His Son to die for sinners is what brings glory and praise to God.
- 11) The Jews, as secondary causes, did not have such pure motives when they handed Christ over to be executed by the Romans.
 - a) They murdered Him.
 - b) They were seeking neither justice nor God's glory, but were moved out of envy and hatred.
- 12) In this one single act in history, we can observe the sovereign hand of God in the execution of His eternal decrees and the free actions of men taking place without mixture and confusion.
- 13) The Jews committed sin while God punished sin.
- 14) As when Joseph's brother sold him into slavery to carry out God's purpose of saving many people from starvation: what his brothers meant for evil, God meant for good (Genesis 50:20).
- 15) In the same fashion, all of history works together to bring glory to God.
- 16) What a wise, powerful, holy, and glorious plan that God decreed in Himself before the foundation of the world.

Transition: After this pregnant explanation of the nature of God's decrees, the next paragraph answers one of the more common misconceptions about this doctrine—that God's foreknowledge [as mere precognition] of future events was somehow in play when God pre-ordained all that will take place.

- As if God saw what would happen and then determined what He planned to do afterwards.
- But our confession explains in the next paragraph why this is not the case.

II. God's Decrees Did Not Include Foresight, P2

P2: Although God knoweth whatsoever may or can come to pass, upon all supposed conditions, yet hath He not decreed anything, because He foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions.

- A. God does Know the Future and Every Possible Contingency (*Although God knoweth whatsoever may or can come to pass, upon all supposed conditions,*)
 - God knows the future because He ordained the future.
- B. God's Decrees Are Not Based Upon any Foresight into the Future (*yet hath He not decreed anything, because He foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions.*)
 1. A false understanding of the word "foreknowledge"
 2. Scriptural proof—Romans 9:10–23
 3. It is impossible for God to look outside of Himself when determining what He is going to decree.
 4. It is impossible for the One who knows all things to learn anything new.
 - a) This rules out Arminianism
 - b) This also rules out what is known as Open Theism

Transition: After answering the common objection about God's eternal decrees, the confession turns to one of the more important implications of the decrees of God—election.

III. God's Decrees Included Election and Reprobation, P3

P3. By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestinated, or foreordained to eternal life through Jesus Christ, to the praise of His

glorious grace; others being left to act in their sin to their just condemnation, to the praise of His glorious justice.

A. The Nature of Election

1. Election is an Active Decree (*By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels*)
 - By an active decree, we mean that it is a decree that directly and immediately manifests God's glory: for the manifestation of His glory,
 - By an active decree, we mean that God directly chose particular men and angels: some men and angels
 - Ephesians 1:4 even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world
 - 1 Timothy 5:21 In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels
2. Election is unto Eternal Life (*are predestinated, or foreordained to eternal life*)
 - Matthew 25:31–34 When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."
 - Election is unto full salvation, which our confession explains in more detail in paragraph 5.
3. Election is through Christ (*through Jesus Christ,*)
 - Ephesians 1:3–6 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.
 - All spiritual blessing are in Christ...including election

4. Election is unto the Praise of God's Grace (to the praise of His glorious grace;)
 - Ephesians 1:11–12 In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.
 - Election unto full salvation displays God's divine mercy, grace, and removes any room for human boasting.

B. The Nature of Reprobation

1. Reprobation is a Passive Decree (*Others being left*)

- Though there is no chronological delay in any of God's decrees, since all of God's decrees are equally eternal, reprobation is a passive decree.
- In that, God's priority was not first who would be reprobate, but His priority was to choose an elect people for His Son.
- The reprobate, therefore, consist of those whom God did not choose
- Thus, election does no injustice to the non-elect, for God was under no obligation to choose any.

2. Reprobation is Leaving the Non-elect to Themselves (*to act in their sin*)

- Those who deny any distinctions between active and passive decrees forget the importance of secondary causes.
- God does decree all things, including sin, but as we have already seen above, His decrees incorporate the laws of nature and the volition of humanity.
- Thus, reprobation does no injustice to the non-elect but by God's eternal purposes leaves man (as our confession says) to act in their sins.
 - It is important to note that paragraph 5 explains that election, as an active decree, consists of God's directly bringing about full salvation, which includes the gift of faith, regeneration, and sanctification, but reprobation simply leaves men to act freely in their own sins.

3. Reprobation is Just (*to their just condemnation,*)

- For this reason, their condemnation is just and not based upon God's eternal decree but upon their own willful disobedience.
4. Reprobation is unto the Praise of God's Justice (*to the praise of His glorious justice*)
- God remains sovereign over reprobation (Jude 4), but this sovereignty displays His divine justice: for it does not involve God condemning people to hell independent of their sins.

Transition: Explaining the doctrine of election and reprobation, our confession affirms with clarity that election is fixed, free, and unto full salvation.

IV. Election is Definite, P4

P4. These angels and men thus predestinated and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed, and their number so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished.

- Election, as with all of God's decrees, is immutable.

V. Election is Free, P5

P5. Those of mankind that are predestinated to life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to His eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of His will, hath chosen in Christ unto everlasting glory, out of His mere free grace and love, without any other thing in the creature as a condition or cause moving Him thereunto.

- A. Election is Free because It is Eternal and Immutable (*Those of mankind that are predestinated to life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to His eternal and immutable purpose*)
- Ephesians 1:4, 9, 11
 - We were not there (in eternity past), and He did not base our election upon anything within us.
 - Thus, election is by grace and grace alone

- Election is free because it is immutable—Hell and all of its powers cannot alter the purposes of God
- B. Election is Free because It is According to God's Will (*and the secret counsel and good pleasure of His will.*)
- We are entirely indebted to God, for God, and God alone, determined our election.
- C. Election is Free because We were Chosen in Christ (*hath chosen in Christ unto everlasting glory,*)
- We are beneficiaries of being the Father's eternal gift to His Son.
- D. Election is Free because It is Out of Free Grace and Love (*out of His mere free grace and love,*)
- 2 Timothy 1:9 who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began
- E. Election is Free because It is Undeserved (*without any other thing in the creature as a condition or cause moving Him thereunto.*)
- Ephesians 2:8–10 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

V. Election is unto Full Salvation, P6

P6. As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so He hath, by the eternal and most free purpose of His will, foreordained all the means thereunto; wherefore they who are elected, being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ, are effectually called unto faith in Christ, by His Spirit working in due season, are justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept by His power through faith unto salvation; neither are any other redeemed by Christ, or effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only.

- A. Full Salvation Includes Eternal Glory (*As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so He hath, by the eternal and most free purpose of His will, foreordained all the means thereunto; wherefore they who are elected,*)

- Romans 8:28–30 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.
- B. Full Salvation Includes being Redeemed by Christ (*being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ,*)
- 1 Thessalonians 5:9–10 For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him.
- C. Full Salvation Includes being Effectually Called (*are effectually called*)
- D. Full Salvation Includes the Gift of Faith (*unto faith in Christ,*)
- E. Full Salvation Includes Regeneration (*by His Spirit working in due season,*)
- F. Full Salvation Includes Justification (*are justified,*)
- G. Full Salvation Includes Adoption (*adopted,*)
- H. Full Salvation Includes Sanctification (*sanctified,*)
- I. Full Salvation Includes Preservation (*and kept by His power through faith unto salvation; neither are any other redeemed by Christ, or effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only.*)

Transition: We come now to a concluding warning as we turn our attention to the importance and value of this doctrine.

VI. The Doctrine of God's Decrees is Beneficial if Handled with Care, P7

P7. The doctrine of the high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care, that men attending the will of God revealed in His Word, and yielding obedience thereunto, may, from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election; so shall this doctrine afford matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God, and of humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all that sincerely obey the gospel.

A. How it Needs to be Handled with Care

1. It Must be Handled with Prudence (*The doctrine of the high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care,*)

- Because a proper understanding of God's decrees includes distinctions between active and passive decrees, divine concurrence with secondary causes, reprobation, and with how a holy and sovereign God is not the author of sin; we must handle this doctrine with the utmost care.
- We do not need to become impatient with those that do not at first understand or readily accept this doctrine—for it is only reasonable to have honest questions.
- Humility should govern the manner in which we handle this glorious doctrine

2. It Must be Handled with Diligence (*that men attending the will of God revealed in His Word,*)

- But just because this doctrine is difficult and complex, does not mean that all Christians should not give themselves in seeking to understand it
- It is precious and valuable for the Christian life

3. It Must be Handled with Obedience (*and yielding obedience thereunto,*)

- With this said, however, we must surrender our thoughts to “Thus saith the Lord,” even if we don’t or can’t fully understand it completely

B. It is Beneficial for Those Who Do Handle It with Care

- Those who do handle this doctrine with humility and obedience will find it beneficial

1. It Provides Assurance of Election (*may, from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election;*)

- Because election is not merely to glory, but unto faith, repentance, sanctification, and perseverance, we can be assured that we are chosen by God, in part, by examining the evidence.
- 1 Thessalonians 1:4–5 For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

- In fact, we are told to make our calling and election sure. 2 Peter 1:10 Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall.
2. It Incites Praise, Reverence, and Admiration (*so shall this doctrine afford matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God,*)
- Ephesians 1:3–6 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.
 - Only when we fully realize that salvation, from start to finish, is of grace alone, can we fully ascribe glory to God alone.
 - May we all be moved to praise God deeply for His sovereign and free grace!
3. It Produces Humility, Diligence, and Consolation (*and of humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all that sincerely obey the gospel.*)
- a. This doctrine, if understood properly, does not lead to pride, but humility. (*and of humility,*)
- Though some have used this doctrine to lift themselves up in intellectual pride, it should cause us to see ourselves as no better or worthy or wise as the worst of sinners
 - It is doubtful that those who are prideful truly comprehend the decrees of God
- b. It also does not lead to antinomianism, as some charge, but diligence. (*diligence, ... to all that sincerely obey the gospel.*)
- Because God's decrees include secondary causes, we remain responsible
 - Philippians 2:12–13 Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

- ... to all that sincerely obey the gospel.
- c. Finally, it provides the faithful much consolation, especially in times of trouble. *(and abundant consolation to all that sincerely obey the gospel.)*
- Romans 8:28, “all things work together for good...,” is impossible without the eternal, immutable, all-wise decrees of God

Conclusion

- So, here we have, in our confession, a concise but rich explanation of the doctrine of God’s decrees.
- But let us make sure that we follow its counsel as we seek to handle it with great humility and reverence as we are driven to a greater appreciation of the wisdom, goodness, and grace of God for His pre-ordaining all things for His own glory and the good of His chosen people.

III. OF GOD’S DECREE

3:1 God has decreed in Himself, from all eternity, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably, all things, whatsoever comes to pass; [a] yet so as thereby is God neither the author of sin nor has fellowship with any therein; [b] nor is violence offered to the will of the creature, nor yet is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established; [c] in which appears His wisdom in disposing all things, and power and faithfulness in accomplishing His decree [d].

[a] Isaiah 46:10; Ephesians 1:11; Hebrews 6:17; Romans 9:15,18 [b] James 1:15,17; 1 John 1:5 [c] Acts 4:27,28; John 19:11 [d] Numbers 23:19; Ephesians 1:3–5

3:2 Although God knows whatsoever may or can come to pass, upon all supposed conditions, [e] yet has He not decreed anything, because He foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions [f].

[e] Acts 15:18 [f] Romans 9:11,13,16,18

3:3 By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestinated, or foreordained to eternal life through Jesus Christ, [g] to the praise of His

glorious grace; [h] others being left to act in their sin to their just condemnation, to the praise of His glorious justice [i].

[g] 1 Timothy 5:21; Matthew 25:34 [h] Ephesians 1:5,6 [i] Romans 9:22,23; Jude 4

3:4 These angels and men thus predestinated and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed, and their number so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished [k].

[k] 2 Timothy 2:19; John 13:18

3:5 Those of mankind that are predestinated to life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to His eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of His will, has chosen in Christ unto everlasting glory, out of His mere free grace and love, [l] without any other thing in the creature as a condition or cause moving Him thereunto [m].

[l] Ephesians 1:4, 9, 11; Romans 8:30; 2 Timothy 1:9; 1 Thessalonians 5:9 [m] Romans 9:13,16; Ephesians 2:9,12

3:6 As God has appointed the elect unto glory, so He has, by the eternal and most free purpose of His will, foreordained all the means thereunto; [n] wherefore they who are elected, being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ, [o] are effectually called unto faith in Christ, by His Spirit working in due season, are justified, adopted, sanctified, [p] and kept by His power through faith unto salvation; [q] neither are any other redeemed by Christ, or effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only [r].

[n] 1 Peter 1:2; 2 Thessalonians 2:13 [o] 1 Thessalonians 5:9,10 [p] Romans 8:30; 2 Thessalonians 2:13 [q] 1 Peter 1:5 [r] John 10:26, 17:9, 6:64

3:7 The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care, that men attending the will of God revealed in His Word, and yielding obedience thereunto, may, from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election; [s] so shall this doctrine afford matter of praise, [t] reverence, and admiration of God, and of humility, [u] diligence, and abundant consolation to all that sincerely obey the gospel [x]

[s] 1 Thessalonians 1:4,5; 2 Peter 1:10 [t] Ephesians 1:6; Romans 11:33 [u] Romans 11:5,6,20 [x] Luke 10:20

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NOTES:

¹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 175.

² Ibid., 171.



Tom Nettles

1689 Confession Outline

Chapter 18

The Character of Biblical Assurance

This chapter suggests four major points to be considered on the issue of assurance of salvation. There is enough material in each point for a series of four sermons on the issue. Each paragraph will be quoted followed by a suggested expository outline. I would also recommend for expository ideas Spurgeon's sermon, preached May 13, 1888, on *The Blessing of Full Assurance* (1 John 5:13).

18:1 Although temporary believers and other unregenerate men, may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favor of God and in a state of salvation, which hope of theirs shall perish; [a] yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love Him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before Him, may in this life be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, [b] which hope shall never make them ashamed [c].

[a] Job 8:13,14; Matthew 7:22,23 [b] 1 John 2:3, 3:14,18,19,21,24, 5:13 [c] Romans 5:2,5

I. A Well-founded assurance of salvation is possible

- A. Some may profess with great certainty that they are saved, but do not have the root of the matter in them. Jesus warned that some will say Lord, Lord, but have never

had the heart to love and obey Christ (Matthew 7:21–23). Hebrews has warning for those that appear to be among the people of God but still have an evil heart of unbelief (3:12).

- B. True Believers may, in this life, discover a well-founded assurance that they have indeed been redeemed by Christ. John wrote his first letter largely to give true spiritual knowledge of the possession of eternal life. “These things have I written to you that believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13).
- C. Jonathan Edwards wrote, “There is no question whatsoever, that is of greater importance to mankind, and that it more concerns every individual person to be well resolved in, than this, what are the distinguishing qualifications of those that are in favor with God and entitled to his eternal rewards?” (*Religious Affections*, preface).

18:2 This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion grounded upon a fallible hope, but an infallible assurance of faith, [d] founded on the blood and righteousness of Christ revealed in the Gospel; [e] and also upon the inward evidence of those graces of the Spirit unto which promises are made, [f] and on the testimony of the Spirit of adoption, witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God; [g] and as a fruit thereof, keeping the heart both humble and holy [h].

[d] Hebrews 6:11,19 [e] Hebrews 6:17,18 [f] 2 Peter 1:4,5,10,11 [g] Romans 8:15,16 [h] 1 John 3:1–3

II. Assurance is based on a network of identifiable evidences, both objective and subjective

- A. Genuine assurance has an objective foundation
 - 1. The blood and righteousness of Christ are the two immutable things in which it is impossible for God to lie. The completed work of Christ guarantees that God will save sinners. Consider the possibility that the “two unchangeable things” of Hebrews 6:18 are defined for us in 7:26–28, from which the confession probably derived the phrase “the blood and righteousness of Christ.”
 - 2. Because of the nature of substitution, ransom, propitiation, and redemption, the price that Christ paid will certainly achieve its gracious purpose in a manner

consistent with justice. A sinner can find true assurance only because it is sure that God through His Son will save those given to Him.

3. He will save sinners who hear and believe the gospel.

B. Genuine assurance has a subjective reality

1. Those who savingly hear loathe their sin, repent of it, and desire union with Christ in His righteousness.
2. They love the brethren and increase in that love, desire holiness and increase in that holiness.

C. Genuine assurance has a Spirit-affirmed rational basis

1. The witness of the Spirit with our spirit is not a special revelation to us that we are saved. This is not a witness to our Spirit, but with our spirit, that is, the rational, moral consciousness of man.
2. Rather, as we examine our lives in light of the revelation of God's Word, the Spirit gives illumination so that our mind and heart find rest in the evidence of conformity to the biblical evidences of a genuine work of the Spirit.
3. Jonathan Edwards, in *Religious Affections*, wrote, Paul's meaning "is not to be understood of two spirits, that are two separate, collateral, independent witnesses,; but 'tis by the evidence, by infusing and shedding abroad the love of God, the spirit of a child, in the heart; and our spirit, or our conscience, receives and declares this evidence for our rejoicing."

Benjamin Keach: "So the Holy Ghost gives in such clear demonstration and proof to the clearing up of a man's evidence for heaven, that when all cases are clearly considered, a poor saint, though doubtful before, come to a good and full satisfaction therein. God's Spirit and conscience compares a man's state with the word of God; and if upon trial, it appears that those qualifications are wrought in his heart, that the word expressly mentions, concerning the truth of grace, he then finds he hath no more cause to doubt of the goodness of his condition." [*Types and Metaphors*, 519f]

D. Genuine Assurance produces holy humility

1. Genuine assurance does not say "Let us continue in sin that grace may abound."

2. It does not produce self-confidence or spiritual arrogance.
3. It focuses on the mercies of God and purely unmerited status of salvation granted by the grace of God.
4. “Assurance will make us love God and praise him.”
5. “Assurance will drop sweetness into all our creature enjoyments.”
6. “Assurance will make us active and lively in God’s service.” [These last three points are from Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity*.]

18:3 This infallible assurance does not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be partaker of it; [i] yet being enabled by the Spirit to know the things which are freely given him of God, he may, without extraordinary revelation, in the right use of means, attain thereunto: [k] and therefore it is the duty of every one to give all diligence to make his calling and election sure, that thereby his heart may be enlarged in peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, in love and thankfulness to God, and in strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience, the proper fruits of this assurance; [l]—so far is it from inclining men to looseness [m].

[i] Isaiah 50:10; Psalm 88; Psalm 77:1–12 [k] 1 John 4:13; Hebrews 6:11,12 [l] Romans 5:1,2,5, 14:17; Psalm 119:32 [m] Romans 6:1,2; Titus 2:11,12,14

III. Because Assurance follows faith and its evidences, one must be diligent in coming to a well-founded assurance of right standing in Christ’s redemptive love.

- A. True faith might be present where personal assurance is not clear [note the word “so” in the confession], Faith does contain the seed of assurance in it, but not in such a manner that it immediately and unchangingly carries assurance with it.
 1. Spurgeon said: “I speak affectionately to the weaker ones, who cannot yet say that they know they have believed. I speak not to your condemnation, but to your consolation. Full assurance is not essential to salvation, but it is essential to satisfaction.”
- B. Even so, one might still gain assurance by serious examination of both the promises of God in Christ and a consideration of the biblical characteristics of a work of the Spirit of God. Though such assurance is a work of the Spirit, it is not of the nature of an “extraordinary revelation.”

- C. If one engages in earnest pursuit of those spiritual traits that are evidences of a changed heart and looks with gratitude to the completed work of Christ he can attain assurance that is well-founded.
1. Because of the way in which one comes to assurance, it is his duty to seek it, for the very search is an exercise in practical piety.
 2. Cornelius Tyree, wrote, "In religion there are two fundamental propositions equally true and important; one is, as there can be no religious principle, unless it is succeeded by religious practice; so there can be no religious practice unless it is preceded by religious principle....You may, by pruning off the dead limbs and loosening and manuring the earth around the roots of the stunted, withered tree, resuscitate it, and make it fruit-bearing. But no matter how much you may dig-about and enrich the roots of the dead tree, no matter how propitious the sunbeams and showers may be, it will remain dead." (Tyree, *The Living Epistle*, chapter 5).
 3. Even so, giving spiritual attention and nurture to a dwarfed and stunted spiritual life will bring it to health and spiritual fruit, and be foundational to assurance.
- D. Thus, assurance of salvation does not encourage indolence or unwarranted confidence but encourages one to progress in holiness and gratitude.

18:4 True believers may have the assurance of their salvation divers ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted; as by negligence in preserving of it, [n] by falling into some special sin which wounds the conscience and grieves the Spirit; [o] by some sudden or vehement temptation, [p] by God's withdrawing the light of His countenance, and suffering even such as fear Him to walk in darkness and to have no light, [q] yet are they never destitute of the seed of God [r] and life of faith, [s] that love of Christ and the brethren, that sincerity of heart and conscience of duty out of which, by the operation of the Spirit, this assurance may in due time be revived, [t] and by the which, in the meantime, they are preserved from utter despair [u].

[n] Canticles 5:2,3,6 [o] Psalm 51:8,12,14 [p] Psalm 116:11; 77:7,8, 31:22 [q] Psalm 30:7 [r] 1 John 3:9 [s] Luke 22:32 [t] Psalm 42:5,11 [u] Lamentations 3:26-31

IV. Temporary loss of assurance caused by a multitude of factors, but grace preserves the believer from despair.

Andrew Fuller, one of the most useful pastor-theologians ever to minister in Baptist life went through deep trials of soul in 1780. In September he wrote, “Very much in doubt respecting my being is a state of grace. I cannot see that I have, or ever had, for any constancy, such an idea of myself as must be implied in true humility. The Lord have mercy upon me, for I know not how it is with me. One thing I know, that if I be a Christian at all, real Christianity in me is inexpressibly small in degree. ... I mean the workings of real grace in my soul are so feeble, that I hardly think they can be feebler in any true Christian.”

- A. Lack of the pursuit of those qualities of life to which assurance is promised may cause it to flag.
- B. Falling into a sin—those works of the flesh described in Galatians 5:19–21—will be reason for loss of assurance. The person thus falling needs to be, and can be, restored, both to fellowship with the saints and assurance of the sonship.
- C. Sometimes the mere thought of such sin that arises with suddenness and power in the heart can interrupt a believer’s sense of sonship. The sudden rising of the stench of indwelling sin can foul the spiritual perceptions of a person’s heart and cause the evidence of grace to be smothered for a while. This kind of awareness seemed to operate in Fuller’s bouts with the issue of assurance. “O wretched men that I am: who shall deliver me from the body of this death? O mine iniquity! Surely I had rather die, than feel again what I have felt of the odious risings of this unholy heart.”
- D. Sometimes God will hide Himself and cast a cloud over our certainty so as to give us a deeper sense of dependence on Him.
 - 1. Thomas Watson wrote, “God is a free agent, and may give or suspend assurance pro licito, as he pleases. Where there is the sanctifying work of the Spirit, he may withhold the sealing work, partly to keep the soul humble; partly to punish our careless walking.” Watson tends to identify assurance with the sealing of the Spirit. Though I take a different view of the sealing of the Spirit, the point concerning assurance is worth pondering.
- E. When these things occur, the transforming grace of the Spirit along with all that pertains to life and godliness is not gone, but only hidden for a while.

1. Watson again: “Want of assurance shall not hinder the success of the saint’s prayers. ... Faith may be strongest when assurance is weakest. ... When God is out of sight, he is not out of covenant”

- F. Those graces will reassert themselves at some point in the future and will operate secretly to keep the child of God from despair.

For many reasons, the professing must seek to come to a genuine and well-grounded assurance of salvation. Unreserved service to God is one of the powerful results of true assurance. Spurgeon preached, “Full assurance gives a man a grateful zeal for the God he loves. These are the people that will go to the Congo for Jesus, for they know they are his. These are the people that will lay down their all for Christ, for Christ is theirs. These are the people that will bear scorn and shame and misrepresentation for the truth’s sake, for they know that they have eternal life. These are they that will keep on preaching and teaching, spending and working, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven, and they know it. They will do little for what they doubt, and much for what they believe. ... When you know that heaven is yours, you are anxious to get ready for it. Full assurance finds fuel for zeal to feed upon.”

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