

FOUNDERS JOURNAL

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DECREES





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

Decrees

This issue of the *Founders Journal* deals with chapters three and five of the *Second London Confession*—“Of God’s Decree” and “Of Divine Providence.” Three articles concern the absolute sovereignty of the decrees. Tom Hicks deals with the confessional statement, “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” and shows the larger confessional context of the affirmation. Tom has shined a bright light on the wisdom of God displayed in the divine decrees and their accomplishment. Jared Longshore focuses more precisely on the doctrine of predestination to eternal life and inserts the spirit of joy and celebration in the contemplation of such grace. Richard Blaylock tackles an issue that often is ignored or deftly sidestepped, that of reprobation. It is as sober and serious as it is true and is handled with reverence by Richard. Each of these writers shows the confessional consistency and biblical foundation of each of these doctrines. We then turn to the important issue, already introduced, of the use of fit means to accomplish the divine decrees. Aaron Matherly, in this context, looks at the statement “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.” He avoids the huge temptation to speculation, though not unaware of the philosophical work that surrounds this tension, and focuses on the biblical examples that demonstrate this observation of revealed truth. Such a breathtaking look at God’s eternal purpose calls for careful, prayerful, loving, and mature pastoral insight and determination in making the appropriate applications of these truths. So the Confession admonishes, “The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to

be handled with special prudence and care.” This caveat is not an encouragement to avoid the issue, but should direct the minister to present it as an impetus to encourage “praise, reverence, and admiration of God and of humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all that sincerely obey the Gospel.” Fred Malone, a seasoned pastor and writer, and an experienced teacher of these doctrines has helped us see more clearly both the privilege and the manner in which such truths should be handled. This is rich truth; consider each aspect carefully with the intention of savoring each thought for the maximum benefit to spiritual growth and gospel proclamation.

—Tom J. Nettles



Tom Hicks

The Nature of God's Eternal Decree

Chapter 3 of the *Second London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689* (2LC) is titled, “Of God’s Decree.” God’s “decree” is His plan or purpose that has existed in His mind from eternity past. Robert Shaw says, “By the decree of God is meant his purpose or determination with respect to future things; or, more fully, his determinate counsel, whereby from all eternity, he fore-ordained whatever he should do, or would permit to be done, in time.”¹ The decree is an aspect of God’s internal work and it therefore precedes any of God’s external works in time and space. God’s external works of creation and providence implement God’s eternal decree.

The fact that this chapter on the decree comes so near the beginning of the confession signals the God-centered character of the theology of its framers. The doctrine that God eternally and unconditionally decreed all future things necessarily follows from the fact that God is independent, all knowing, and unchangeable, which is what chapter 2 of the confession teaches. Since God is independent, it follows that His decree cannot depend upon anything in the future or anything outside of Himself. Since God knows all things, it follows that God must have first decreed all things. And since God is unchangeable, it follows that God must have an unchangeable decree at the foundation of all that He does.²

The confession was written at a time of tremendous social unrest in England during the 1640’s. The great doctrine of God’s decree, therefore, must have been a great source of comfort to those who confessed it as they rested in the knowledge that God’s eternal

purpose does not change and that it certainly comes to pass.³ This article aims to explain chapter 3, paragraphs 1 and 2, of the *Second London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689* which are about the nature of God's decree, while also interacting with the confession's teaching on creation and providence. The text of 2LBC 3.1 reads as follows:

Paragraph 1. 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;(1) yet so as thereby is God neither the author of sin nor hath fellowship with any therein;(2) 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;(3) in which appears His wisdom in disposing all things, and power and faithfulness in accomplishing His decree.(4)

1. Isaiah 46:10; Ephesians 1:11; Hebrews 6:17; Romans 9:15, 18
2. James 1:13; 1 John 1:5
3. Acts 4:27, 28; John 19:11
4. Numbers 23:19; Ephesians 1:3-5

Paragraph 2. Although God knoweth whatsoever may or can come to pass, upon all supposed conditions,(5) yet hath He not decreed anything, because He foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions.(6)

5. Acts 15:18
6. Romans 9:11, 13, 16, 18

These two paragraphs explain what the Bible teaches about the nature of God's decree. The remaining paragraphs in chapter 3 discuss the details of God's decree as it pertains to election and salvation. Consider the confession's description of the nature of God's decree.

God's Decree is Universal and Effectual

Paragraph one says that "God hath decreed in Himself ... all things, whatsoever comes to pass," meaning that God's decree is universal and comprehensive. Nothing happens outside of God's decree, and everything that comes to pass is the perfect outworking of God's decree. Van Dixhoorn says, "All that happens in time and eternity is according to the will of the one who 'made' both."⁴ Consider two of the biblical passages cited in the confession that teach the universal character of God's decree.

The first passage is Ephesians 1:11, which says, “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.” Paul says God has a “purpose” or “counsel” that encompasses “all things.” The words “all things” are comprehensive language. Some may suggest that the word “all” is limited to a certain category of things, but context shows us that “all” refers to the whole universe. Verse 10 says that God has a plan “to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.” “Heaven” and “earth” in verse 10 are a “merism,” a literary device that contrasts two words, intending to encompass everything.

The second passage that teaches the universal character of God’s decree is Isaiah 46:9-10, which says, “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.’”⁵ Notice how this passage teaches a comprehensive decree. It says that in the “beginning,” God “declares,” or speaks forth, what will happen at the end of all things. And God’s purpose extends to all things not yet done. That is comprehensive.

God’s decree is divided into two main categories that encompass everything outside of God Himself: creation and providence. After chapter 3 on the decree, the confession explains the doctrines of creation (chapter 4) and providence (chapter 5). 2LC 4.1 describes God’s work of creation and says, “In the beginning it pleased God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit ... to create or make the world, and all things therein, whether visible or invisible.” Providence is God’s activity to uphold, direct, and govern everything He has created. Consider 2LC 5.1, which beautifully dovetails with 3.1, and shows how the decree works out in providence:

Paragraph 1. God the good Creator of all things, in His infinite power and wisdom does uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures and things,(1) from the greatest even to the least,(2) by His most wise and holy providence, to the end for the which they were created, according unto His infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will; to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, infinite goodness, and mercy.(3)

1. Hebrews 1:3; Job 38:11; Isaiah 46:10, 11; Psalm 135:6

2. Matthew 10:29-31

3. Ephesians 1:11

Thus, God purposes in His decree to oversee every detail of creation. He decrees “chance” happenings (1 Kings 22:28-34; Job 5:6), the details of our lives (Job 14:5; Psalm 139:16; Matthew 10:29-30), the affairs of nations (2 Kings 5:1; Psalm 75:1-7; Proverbs

21:31), the free actions of human beings (Proverbs 16:1, 9; 21:1), the sinful actions of human beings (Genesis 50:20), good and evil events (Isaiah 45:7; Amos 3:6; Job 1:22; Jeremiah 15:2), and the final destruction of the wicked (1 Samuel 2:25; Proverbs 16:4; Jude 4).⁶

God's Decree is Good

The teaching of God's universal decree raises several objections, which the confession recognizes and seeks to answer. The first objection to a universal decree is that God must not be good. Some say that if God decrees sin, then God must be the author of sin. The confession, however, says that God decrees every act of human sin, "yet so as thereby is God neither the author of sin nor hath fellowship with any therein" (2LC 3.1). In another place, the confession says, "... His determinate counsel extends itself even to the first fall, and all other sinful actions both of angels and men ... yet so, as the sinfulness of their acts proceeds only from the creatures, and not from God, who, being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin" (2LC 5.4). Therefore, while God decrees sin, He is not the author of sin.

Many passages of Scripture demonstrate that God is not the author of sin. The Bible everywhere asserts that God is good. For example, "Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good" (Psalm 107:1); "You are good and do good" (Psalm 119:68). A good God cannot be the author of sin.

Additionally, 1 John 2:16 teaches that sins come from the world and not from God the Father. It says, "For all that is in the world – the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions – is not from the Father but is from the world." This denies that anything evil comes from God. The phrase "all that is in the world" anticipates the three categories of sin to follow, which account exhaustively for every kind of sin: "desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions." None of these are "from the Father" and all of them are "from the world." Therefore, 1 John 2:16 clearly teaches that God is not the author of sin.

The twin truths that God decrees sin but is not the author of sin must be held together in tension. The confession affirms both because the Bible teaches both, but it does not attempt to reconcile them completely, only to declare what the Bible declares without diminishing one truth in favor of another. In another place, the confession attempts to give

some explanation to how God can decree sin without being the author of sin. It says “God was pleased ... to permit” the fall (2LC 6.1). This shows that the manner in which God decrees good and evil are different. God only decrees to permit evil, and yet the confession is also clear that God’s permission is not a “bare permission,” since when God decrees to permit evil, He powerfully renders it certain (2LC 5.4). Though God renders sin certain in the decree, He is never the agent of sin, or the secondary cause of sin. Gordon Clark attempts to explain these things by way of illustration:

Perhaps this illustration is faulty, as most illustrations are, but consider that God is the cause of my writing this book. Who could deny that God is the first or ultimate cause, since it was he who created mankind? But although God is the cause of this chapter, he is not its author. It would be much better, if he were.⁷

An “author of sin” is the person who actually commits the sin. In whatever manner God decrees to permit sin, He does so without ever committing sin Himself. God is not a sinner. Though we might ask questions about how this could be, given that God decrees sin. But the Scriptures do not tell us. While we may not know the answer to that question, we can confidently rest with assurance that God does know.

God’s Decree Accounts for Human Freedom

A second objection to God’s universal decree is that human beings must not be free. Some think that if God comprehensively decrees all things, then human beings cannot be considered free in any meaningful sense. With respect to the human will, the confession states, “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” (2LC 3.1). To understand what this means, it is critical to understand the meaning of the word “contingency.” J.V. Fesko explains:

Contingency does not mean that something does not have a cause, as Jonathan Edwards argued. Rather, it means that something could be otherwise. God’s decree, for example, is contingent in the sense that he was under no external or internal necessity to decree anything – He was free to decree and free not to decree.⁸

The same is true of free human choices. When human beings choose freely, the confession says they have the ability to choose other than what they chose. In the chapter on divine providence, the confession says that God orders all things “to fall out according

to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently” (2LC 5.2). God decrees contingent things without imposing any necessity upon them. His decree renders contingent things certain but not necessary. In the case of sin, human beings can always choose otherwise, but God’s decree makes their choice certain.

The confession’s chapter on free will declares, “God hath endued the will of man with that natural liberty and power of acting upon choice, that is neither forced, nor by any necessity of nature determined to do good or evil” (2LC 9.1). It does not explain how God renders contingencies certain in the decree. It simply affirms both contingency and certainty because the Bible affirms both. William Ames wrote:

The will of God does not imply a necessity in all future things, but only a certainty in regard to the event. Thus the event was certain that Christ’s bones should not be broken, because God willed that they should not be. But there was no necessity imposed upon the soldiers, their spears, and other secondary causes then present.⁹

This means that “certainty” and “contingency” are not mutually exclusive. The divines taught that God’s decree grounds contingencies and makes them possible. Without God’s decree, making contingencies certain, there could be no contingent choices at all. Fesko observes, “apart from God’s decree and the ordination of the existence of creatures, there would be no freedom or contingency in the world; one must account for both primary and secondary causes in any one event.”¹⁰ This is simply because the divine decree is the reason anything exists or comes to pass. It brings things to pass in different ways, some things freely, some things necessarily, and some things contingently.

The book of Acts illustrates both certainty and contingency in the death of Jesus Christ. Acts 2:23 says, “This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.” God’s “definite plan,” or decree, rendered Christ’s death certain in God’s “foreknowledge.” Human beings, however, “crucified” and “killed” Him. They performed “lawless” deeds. Thus, we see both God’s decree and human freedom and responsibility bound up together in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

God’s Decree Accounts for Means

The third objection to God’s universal decree is that our choices and actions must not matter. Some think that if God has decreed all things, God will accomplish His purpose no matter what people do. The confession, however, says that the decree does not take away

the reality of “second causes” (2LC 3.1). This means that God not only decrees that things will happen, but He also decrees the ways or means by which they will happen. God decrees that the end will come to pass by decreeing the means by which they will come to pass.

For example, “When God decided to save sinners, he specifically decided to save sinners by Jesus Christ.”¹¹ There was no other way for sinners to be saved but through Jesus Christ. The means of all that consummates in Christ’s redemptive work, therefore, are necessary, given God’s holy character and the end God intended. Other means, however, are not morally or legally necessary, but are determined by God’s immutable wisdom. But once God decides to accomplish any ends by any given means, the means must certainly come to pass in order for the ends to be achieved. Similarly, God decreed that He would ordinarily save His elect people by means of the gospel (Romans 10:14–17). If the gospel is not preached, the elect will not ordinarily be saved. God ordains not only the ends, but also the means.” For example, “When God decided to save sinners, he specifically decided to save sinners by Jesus Christ.”

The confession’s doctrine of secondary causes guards against the heresy of fatalism. Fatalists teach that the future is fixed by blind impersonal forces and it does not matter what people choose or do in the world. The fated future always comes to pass. This belief leads to the notion that human choices and actions do not matter. But the teaching of the Bible and of the confession is exactly the opposite. Everything we choose and do matters because our choices and actions contribute to the future ends God has designed. When a fatalist sees a problem, he never thinks to try to solve the problem because his actions cannot change things. But when someone who believes in the doctrine of God’s decree sees a problem, he thinks that God may have decreed his efforts to solve the problem as the means by which the problem will be solved.

God’s Decree is Unconditional

Paragraph 2 of chapter 3 on the divine decree excludes any conditions from the decree. It reads:

Paragraph 2. Although God knoweth whatsoever may or can come to pass, upon all supposed conditions,(5) yet hath He not decreed anything, because He foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions.(6)

5, Acts 15:18

6. Rom. 9:11, 13, 16, 18

This paragraph was written to affirm the absolute freedom of God's decree in opposition to Arminianism and Molinism.¹² Arminianism teaches that God foresees the future free choices of human agents, and then chooses or decrees those choices based on His foreknowledge of what people will choose. Arminianism teaches that God decrees future free choices "because He foresaw it as future." This means that in Arminianism God cannot control the future, since human beings first make their choices and then God decrees whatever they choose. Molinism, formulated by Louis Molina (1535-1600), attempts to give God more control than Arminianism, while still preserving both some degree of libertarian freedom as well as God's decree. It teaches that there are three eternal logical moments in God. First, God knows all the possible worlds He could create (necessary knowledge). Second, God knows what free human beings would choose in each possible world (middle knowledge). Third, based on this knowledge, God chooses to instantiate the best possible world (decree). In this way, Molinism holds that God's decree is based on "that which would come to pass on such conditions." In both Arminianism and Molinism, God's knowledge of the future depends on what free creatures will choose in the future.

But the confession denies that God's decree depends on knowledge conditioned by the future free choices of human agents. Rather, God's knowledge of the future depends on God's decree alone. God knows the future because He decrees the future. Gordon Clark writes:

'Do I decide to use the Queen's Pawn opening in a chess tournament because somehow I can predict that this is what will happen; or am I able to predict that I shall use this opening because I have decided to?' The answer is obvious is it not?¹³

God's decree isn't conditioned by knowledge outside of God, since that would compromise God's independence, immutability, and omniscience. Rather, God's decree is only conditioned by His internal knowledge of all possibilities. This is because God cannot know what something will be until He has first decreed that it will be. This is the clear teaching of verses such as Isaiah 43:11, in which God says, "I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it." That means God "speaks," or knows, the future precisely because He has "purposed," or decreed, the future and will "bring it to pass."

This glorious doctrine of God's decree affords the believer great comfort. We take comfort in the fact that our good God will certainly accomplish all His pleasure. There is no reason to fear what men may do. There is no reason to doubt God's promises. The decree is fuel for our faith and our souls. It teaches that God will keep His Word, that the forces of evil arrayed against Him and His people will fail, that Christ will have His bride, and the gates of hell will not prevail against the advancement of His kingdom.

NOTES:

¹ Robert Shaw, *The Reformed Faith: An Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith* (1845; reprint, Scotland, UK: Christian Focus, 2008), 81.

² Shaw, *The Reformed Faith*, 82.

³ Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading its Theology in Historical Context* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), 174-175.

⁴ Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith: A Readers Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Carlisle, PA: Banner, 2016 reprint), 44.

⁵ All Scripture quotations are taken from the ESV.

⁶ Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 3rd ed. (Durham, England: Evangelical Press, 1999), 63-64.

⁷ Gordon H. Clark, *What Do Presbyterians Believe?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1965), 37.

⁸ J.V. Fesko, *The Theology of the Westminster Standards* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 103.

⁹ William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, trans John Eusden Dykstra (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 1.7.2, (p. 94). Cited in Fesko, *Westminster Standards*, 106.

¹⁰ Fesko, *Westminster Standards*, 107.

¹¹ Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, 46.

¹² Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 184.

¹³ Clark, *What do Presbyterians Believe?*, 39.

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Jared Longshore

Predestination to Eternal Life

Glory Hidden in the Mystery

The doctrine of predestination is a mysterious one. That mystery has resulted in confusion and controversy over this doctrine throughout the history of the church. Men like Pelagius in the early church and John Wesley in the evangelical era have been unable to accept the doctrine. While men like Augustine, John Calvin, and Charles Spurgeon have delighted in it. The questions stemming from the doctrine, which remain unanswered, ought not to stop us like temple guards from approaching this most holy truth. Confidence in Scripture wedded to a humble mind is the key to leaving the court of the Gentiles and going forward into greater knowledge of God and his enigmatic acts.

The mystery of this truth ought not to keep us from embracing the simplicity, sublimity, and serviceability of the doctrine. How *simple* the doctrine appears when Spurgeon says, “I believe the doctrine of election, because I am quite certain that, if God had not chosen me, I should never have chosen Him.”¹ How *sublime* to consider the work of God before the first throb of our hearts, or for that matter before “the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy.”² How *useful* to be sure that God has made certain decisions concerning the future that, come what may, will not change. What a shame not to taste the sweetness of this article because of the complexities which attend it.

Come Behold the Wondrous Mystery

The indispensable thing, then, if we are to welcome the doctrine, is to closely examine what is revealed concerning it in Scripture. And we have an abundance. Spurgeon once said in reply to an Arminian brother who said he had read the Bible through numerous times without finding the doctrine, “the wonder is that you found anything at all: you must have galloped through it at such a rate that you were not likely to have any intelligible idea of the meaning of the Scriptures.”³ Certainly then, I will be unable to examine all of the biblical material on predestination in this article. I will attempt, however, a theological and pastoral engagement with some of the biblical evidence for predestination unto life and salvation as seen in chapter 3 paragraphs 3, 5, and 6 of the *1689 Baptist Confession*. I will consider these paragraphs in detail under five headings (1) the *meaning* of predestined, (2) the *decision* of predestination, (3) the *key* to predestination, (4) the *source* of predestination, and (5) the *purpose* of predestination. The central point to be unpacked is: God predestines some men and angels to eternal life for his own glory.

The section of Chapter 3, Paragraph 3 of the confession which I will focus on in this article says,

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...

The Meaning of Predestined

Predestined is a biblical word. The writers of the confession were not aiming to be extrabiblical when they employed the word *predestinated*. They were attempting to deal with the Bible when they said, “some men and angels are predestinated, or foreordained.” What does the Bible have to say about the verb *predestined*?

It is important to note a couple things at the outset of attempting to answer such a question. First the biblical language that serves *the doctrine* of predestination encompasses more than just one word. To develop an accurate meaning of the doctrine of predestination, then, biblical words beyond the verb of predestine (*proorizo*) must be examined like the noun elect (*eklektos*), and the verb choose (*haireomai*; *eklego*). For example, a study merely of the verb predestine (*proorizo*) will leave one confounded as to why the confession speaks of predestined angels. But a study of the word elect (*eklektos*)

reveals 1 Timothy 5:21, “In the presence of God and Christ Jesus and of the *elect angels*.” Second, the doctrine of predestination “does not depend upon the use of a few words, for as one studies the Bible as a whole this doctrine is seen to be central to much of the teaching of both testaments.”⁴ In other words, there are theological realities concerning God, man, and salvation, that take shape as the totality of Scripture is digested. These realities support the doctrine of predestination. Nevertheless, considering the biblical use of the verb predestine (*proorizo*) begins to shed light on the doctrine so to that consideration we now turn.

The verb predestine (*proorizo*) is used six times in the New Testament:

- **Acts 4:28** “to do whatever your hand and your plan had *predestined* (*proorizo*) to take place.”
- **Romans 8:29** “For those whom he foreknew he also *predestined* (*proorizo*) to be conformed to the image of his Son.”
- **Romans 8:30** “And those whom he *predestined* (*proorizo*) he also called, and those who he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.”
- **1 Corinthians 2:7** “But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God *decreed* (*proorizo*) before the ages for our glory.”
- **Ephesians 1:5** “he *predestined* (*proorizo*) us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will.”
- **Ephesians 1:11** “In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been *predestined* (*proorizo*) according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will.”

This verb has been defined as to “decide upon beforehand, *predetermine*.”⁵ So if a man decides mid-week that he will take his family to the park downtown on Saturday, then he has *predestined*. He decided upon it beforehand. This definition fits the passages above very nicely. In every case, God is the one doing the deciding. And notice that when His deciding concerns people, He is deciding future realities of *some*, not all. In Acts 4:28, He has decided upon the crucifixion beforehand. In Romans 8:29, He has decided to conform those whom He foreknew to the image of His Son beforehand. In Romans 8:30, He subsequently called, justified, and glorified, those whom He had decided upon beforehand to be conformed to the image of his Son. In 1 Corinthians 2:7, He decided upon a secret and hidden wisdom before the ages. In Ephesians 1:5, He decided to adopt Christians as sons beforehand. In Ephesians 1:11, He decided to give an inheritance to Christians beforehand.

So the confession is synthesizing biblical language when it says, “some men and angels are predestinated, or foreordained.” The biblical teaching is that some men and angels are decided upon beforehand. But what does that *decision* consist of?

The Decision of Predestination

The confession continues by saying, “some men and angels are predestinated, or foreordained *to eternal life*.” The doctrine of predestination teaches that some men were decided upon beforehand *to obtain eternal life*. This truth is demonstrated by some of the texts above which contain the verb predestined (*proorizo*) as well as others. In Romans 8:29 what God specifically decides upon is that those whom He foreknew would be “*conformed to the image of his Son*.” This is evidently one aspect of eternal life. No one gets conformed to the image of Christ without obtaining eternal life and no one obtains eternal life without being conformed to the image of Christ. The reaction to seeing this truth might be to think that God, in order to be fair, must have done this for *all people*. The problem with this is twofold. First, as can be seen in verse 29, the text simply does not say *all people*, but plainly limits the number of those who are predestined by saying “*those whom he foreknew* he also predestined.” If the question is raised as to whether God foreknew *all people*, then the second problem is confronted in verse 30 for all those who are foreknown are *glorified*, “And those whom he *predestined* he also called, and those who he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.”

Ephesians 1:5 says that what God specifically decided upon beforehand was that Christians would be adopted as God’s children, “he *predestined* us for adoption as sons.” This adoption, like conformity to Christ, is one aspect of eternal life. No one gets adopted as a child of God without receiving eternal life and vice versa. Jesus in John 8:44 and John in 1 John 3:10 teach that unbelievers are indeed not children of God, but children of the devil. Again the “some” of the confession is seen in Paul’s use of the word *us* in Ephesians 1:5. The word *us* must be determined by the context of Paul’s letter. He identifies who the *us* is only four verses earlier when he says he is an apostle of Christ writing to “*the saints*.”

Ephesians 1:11 also demonstrates that it is eternal life to which God has predestined some men. Paul writes, “In him we have *obtained an inheritance*, having been predestined.” This heavenly inheritance that is obtained by believers is certainly one aspect of eternal life. The position is untenable that God has somehow predestined some men to (1) be conformed to the image of Christ, (2) be adopted as God’s children, and (3) obtain a heavenly

inheritance, but not too obtain eternal life. This truth is only strengthened by other texts like Matthew 25:34 which says, “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.*” This kingdom (eternal life) was prepared for Christians beforehand. Before what? Before the foundation of the world. 1 Peter 1:1-2 as well speaks of being chosen for sprinkling with Christ’s blood. “To those who are *elect exiles* of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and *for sprinkling with his blood.*” Finally, 1 Thessalonians 5:9-10 clearly demonstrates this point, saying, “For God has not *destined us* for wrath, but *to obtain salvation.*”

The Key to Predestination

The 1689 Confession adds to the Westminster Confession when it says that God has predestined some men “to eternal life *through Jesus Christ.*” Although this phrase is short, it ought not be overlooked. This focus on Christ emphasizes that all of God’s blessings come to His people through Christ. We often think of justification, sanctification, and adoption, coming through Christ, but here we see that *the very decision of God* which He made before the foundation of the world that some men would obtain salvation was made *through Christ.* 2 Timothy 1:9 sheds some light on this reality when Paul says, “[God] 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.*” Not only did Christians get their grace before the ages began, but they got it *in Christ.* God delivered grace to them in reference to Christ, because of Christ, for the sake of Christ.

Jesus indicates this truth in His own words when He says in John 17:9, “I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for *those whom you have given me*, for they are yours.” God the Father *had given* Christ certain people. Therefore, not only was the decision of God made in reference to Christ, but He decided to give us to Christ. The eternal life to which some men have been predestined is eternal life *through Christ.* It is dependent upon Christ. It is experienced in Christ. In this context, Ephesians 1:3 takes on greater meaning for God the Father has “blessed us *in Christ* with every spiritual blessing.” The spiritual blessing of being chosen by God as well as the eternal life to which we have been chosen both find their ground in the crucified and risen Savior.

There are significant implications of this reference to Christ as it concerns predestination. No one comes to know eternal life apart from faith in Christ. To draw a different conclusion from the doctrine of predestination would be to miss this all important truth that eternal life is found in Christ alone. Some might question how we can be certain that what God has decided beforehand will actually come to pass given the predestined must still trust in Christ. Chapter 3, Paragraph 6 of the confession demonstrates that God has also predestined “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.” Therefore, the doctrine of predestination does not negate, but confirms the necessity of gospel proclamation and faith in Christ.

The Source of Predestination

In one sense the source of predestination is very simple, God. But there is wonder in considering intently God’s decision regarding the salvation of sinners. The confession states that it is “*by the decree of God ... [that] some men and angels are predestinated.*” God’s decree is “a theological term for *the comprehensive plan* for the world and its history which God sovereignly established in eternity.”⁶ This comprehensive plan includes “all things, whatsoever comes to pass.”⁷ So, among other things, in eternity, God sovereignly established what the temperature would be outside the Empire State building this morning.

Moreover, this decree “*results* from the free, sovereign will of God.”⁸ And the will of God is “*that attribute of God* by which he has determined what he will do; it is known to him alone.”⁹ This attribute of God, known as His will, is “most wise and holy.”¹⁰

The significance is in the fact that God’s predestining of some unto salvation is executed according to both this comprehensive plan He established in eternity (God’s Decree) and this attribute of God which is most secret, wise, and holy (God’s Will). Chapter 3, Paragraph 5 of the confession says that God has chosen the predestined “*according to* His eternal and immutable purpose (God’s Decree), and the secret counsel and good pleasure of His will (God’s Will).”

His decision made beforehand (predestination), then, was not arbitrary, forced, coerced, or against his will; He decided beforehand because *He wanted to, He willed to*. “God’s predestination has his infinite and purposeful wisdom behind it.”¹¹ This is the truth packed

into Ephesians 1:11, which says, “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*.”

At this point, one might ask a final and ultimate question, “Why would He want to predestine some unto salvation?”

The Purpose of Predestination

The answer is found in the confession when it says, “*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*.” God wanted to, and did, predestine certain people to salvation in order to make known His own glory. Romans 9:22 says, “What if God, *desiring to show his wrath* and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, *in order to make known the riches of his glory* for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory.” God’s wrath is His strange work. And He desires to show it in order to ultimately elevate *the riches of His glory*. His grace is glorious and is worthy of praise. And this grace of His is vividly displayed in the doctrine of predestination.

Joy Embedded in the Mystery

That is why the confession speaks of such marvelous uses of this particular truth. By this doctrine, those who love God and obey His Word can “be assured of their eternal election; so shall this doctrine afford matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God.”¹² So while there may be questions that remain unanswered and misunderstandings in need of clarification, we can rejoice in this truth as we commit ourselves to take God at His Word. We can say with the Prince of Preachers,

Whatever may be said about the doctrine of election, it is written in the Word of God as with an iron pen, and there is no getting rid of it. To me, it is one of the sweetest and most blessed truths in the whole of revelation, and those who are afraid of it are so because they do not understand it. If they could but know that the Lord had chosen them, it would make their hearts dance for joy.¹³

NOTES:

¹ Charles Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, 170.

² Job 38:7 (ESV).

³ Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, 171.

⁴ Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 870.

⁵ Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

⁶ Elwell, 302.

⁷ Chapter 3, Paragraph 1, 2LBC.

⁸ Elwell, 303.

⁹ Elwell, 1172.

¹⁰ Chapter 3, Paragraph 1, 2LBC.

¹¹ Richard Belcher, *Arthur W. Pink: Predestination*, 30.

¹² Chapter 3, Paragraph 7, 2LBC.

¹³ Charles Spurgeon, *Spurgeon's Sermons*, 9.374, 375.

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Richard Blaylock

Reprobation and the Second London Confession

In its chapter on God's decrees, the *Second London Confession* states:

By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory some men and Angels are predestinated, or fore-ordained 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.¹

The confession then goes on to say that “these angels and men thus predestinated, and fore-ordained, are particularly, and unchangeably designed, and their number so certain, and definite, that it cannot be either increased, or diminished.”² These statements taken together indicate that the *Second London Confession* affirms reprobation, a doctrine which has been and continues to be the subject of much controversy.

Reprobation refers to God's eternal decree to refrain from providing saving grace to particular fallen individuals and to harden these in their willful sins so that they might be justly condemned and God's glorious justice might be made manifest.³ Perhaps unsurprisingly, many have found the doctrine profoundly distasteful. In the middle of the 16th century, Albertus Pighius, Jerome Bolsec, Sebastian Castellio and others condemned the doctrine in the strongest of terms.⁴ As Calvin recounts, these argued that “all who teach that certain men are positively and absolutely chosen to salvation and others

destined to destruction, think of God unworthily, attributing to Him a severity alien to His justice and goodness.”⁵ In 1691, a group of dissenting Particular Baptists framed a confession of faith explicitly rejecting Calvinist doctrines. Their confession includes the statement that “those that own personal election, and personal reprobation before time, so as to deny the love of God to the world, do not own the faith of the gospel.”⁶ Around fifty years later, John Wesley articulated similar sentiments in a sermon delivered in Bristol. As he declared,

This doctrine [i.e. reprobation] represents our blessed Lord, “Jesus Christ the righteous,” “the only begotten Son of the Father, full of grace and truth,” as an hypocrite, a deceiver of the people, a man void of common sincerity. ... But there is yet more behind; for just as it honours the Son, so doth this doctrine honour the Father. It destroys all his attributes at once: It overturns both his justice, mercy, and truth; yea, it represents the most holy God as worse than the devil, as both more false, more cruel, and more unjust.⁷

Many today hold a similar estimation of reprobation. Despite this state of affairs, I will argue that the framers of the *Second London Confession* were right to affirm reprobation. I will attempt to show that the doctrine of reprobation (1) is taught by Scripture, (2) is made necessary by God’s sovereignty, (3) is consistent with God’s character, and (4) is profitable for Christian discipleship.

Biblical Evidence for Reprobation

As has been shown, there have been many serious charges leveled against the doctrine of reprobation. Evidence from Scripture, however, strongly suggests that God does in fact predestine certain individuals to receive the just condemnation for their sins. The Old Testament repeatedly foreshadows this decree by depicting God as acting to secure the earthly condemnation of certain individuals and groups. The New Testament then goes further by revealing God’s role in fore-ordaining the eternal condemnation of particular fallen men and women. Given the nature of this article, only a few examples can be explored.⁸

The hardening of Pharaoh’s heart in the exodus story strongly hints at the doctrine of reprobation. While Scripture does say that Pharaoh hardened his own heart, the account as a whole suggests that the LORD’s hardening work was primary.⁹ The decisive nature of God’s hardening is made clear by the sequence of events. Before any mention is made of self-hardening, God disclosed His plan to ossify Pharaoh’s heart in Exodus 4:21.

Furthermore, God had specific purposes He desired to accomplish through Pharaoh's continued rebellion. So for instance, YHWH tells Moses that He hardened Pharaoh's heart "that I may show these signs of mine among them, and that you may tell in the hearing of your son and of your grandson how I have dealt harshly with the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them, that you may know that I am the LORD."¹⁰ And as the rest of the narrative makes clear, God hardened the hearts of Pharaoh and his servants, not with a future softening in mind, but with the purpose of destroying them for the display of His glory. Thus, the exodus story seems to teach some form of divine reprobation.

The New Testament builds on the evidence from the Old Testament and teaches more explicitly that God predestines some to eternal perdition. Judas serves as a case in point. The New Testament authors present Judas' betrayal of Jesus as a heinous act for which he was completely responsible; yet, they also depict his actions as being foreordained by God. Thus, Jesus can predict Judas' betrayal beforehand, claiming that Judas' actions would fulfill Old Testament prophecy.¹¹ Even more, the New Testament suggests that God predetermined Judas' eternal condemnation. So in His high priestly prayer, Jesus calls Judas the "son of destruction," and indicates that he was lost so "that the Scripture might be fulfilled."¹² Similarly, in Mark 14:18, Jesus alludes to Psalm 41:9 in order to predict Judas' betrayal. He then states that Judas' sin would be so heinous that "it would have been better for that man if he had not been born."¹³ These descriptions suggest that Judas was predestined to a condition to which non-existence would have been preferable. Altogether, the New Testament data strongly suggests that God predetermined that Judas would betray Jesus and that he would then be justly damned for his heinous sin.

Paul teaches the doctrine of reprobation in Romans 9 while addressing the issue of God's faithfulness in the face of Israel's unbelief.¹⁴ He approaches the issue gradually, first using the examples of Abraham's descendants who were passed over. The apostle indicates that Ishmael was not considered a child of God because he was not the child of promise (Romans 9:7–9). Paul also claims that, before Esau was born, he had been rejected and hated by God while Jacob was chosen and loved (Romans 9:10–13). Given the context and the language employed, the apostle already seems to be referring to reprobation. But hints give way to straightforward assertions as Paul discusses the case of Pharaoh. Paul says that Pharaoh was raised up in order to serve as a demonstration of God's destructive power (Romans 9:17). Furthermore, the exodus story demonstrates that the Lord has the sovereign right to have mercy on whom He desires and to harden whom He desires (Romans 9:18). Then Paul makes his point in the boldest of terms:

You will say to me then, “Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?” But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?” Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?¹⁵

The objection demonstrates that Paul was discussing God’s sovereignty over the hearts of the condemned. Paul replies to his interlocutor with a poignant rebuke of human pride and an appeal to the rights of the Creator. Paul argues that, like a potter, God has the right to “make out of the same lump one vessel for honored use and another for dishonorable use” (Romans 9:21). The first type of vessel seems to refer to those destined to receive mercy, while the second are later called “vessels of wrath prepared for destruction.” Thus, Paul affirms that God does in fact prepare some fallen individuals for eternal damnation. Furthermore, the fact that both are shaped from the same lump indicates that the vessels were not distinguished by anything intrinsic to them. The metaphor makes the point then that the only factor that distinguishes the elect and the reprobate from one another is God’s sovereign purpose. On the one hand, God designed “to show His wrath and to make known His power” through the dishonorable vessels; but on the other hand, the destruction of the reprobate serves “to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory” (Romans 9:22–23). As Calvin states, “the infinite mercy of God towards the elect must appear increasingly worthy of praise, when we see how miserable are all they who escape not his wrath.”¹⁶ The ninth chapter of Romans then explicitly teaches that God, for the praise of His own glory, unconditionally foreordains salvation for some, while He refrains from showing saving mercy to others and instead hardens them in their wickedness to prepare them for their just destruction.

God’s Sovereignty and Reprobation

As we have seen, both testaments testify to the divine act of reprobation. By itself, this ought to compel Christians to receive the doctrine with reverence and humility. At the same time, other theological considerations also seem to render the doctrine necessary. To provide just one example, the doctrine of God’s sovereignty seems to necessitate reprobation.¹⁷ The *Second London Confession* affirms a high view of God’s sovereignty.

It states that “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.”¹⁸ The confession goes on to assert that God’s control extends over the sinful actions of moral creatures:

The Almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God, so far manifest themselves in his Providence, that his determinate Counsel extendeth itself even to the first fall, and all other sinful actions both of Angels, and Men; (and that not by a bare permission) which also he most wisely and powerfully boundeth, and otherwise ordereth, and governeth, in a most manifold dispensation to his most holy ends: yet so, as the sinfulness of their acts proceedeth only from the Creatures, and not from God; who being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be, the author or approver of sin.¹⁹

Such a high view of God’s sovereignty accords with the Scriptures and leads by logical necessity to the doctrine of reprobation.²⁰ If God is sovereign over all things, including all human choices,²¹ then He is sovereign over the choice to reject the gospel.²² Furthermore, if God is sovereign over all the affairs of men, then He is sovereign over where the gospel is preached.²³ Thus, if the gospel must be believed in order for one to be saved (which it must), and God decides where the gospel will be proclaimed (which He does [Acts 16:6-10]), then God is sovereign over where salvation is even made available.

Because of the close connection between sovereignty and reprobation, those who deny the latter must modify their definitions of the former. Arminians for instance, claim that, though God has sovereign rights over the world, He chooses not to exercise them in order to make room for libertarian freedom.²⁴ They claim that God’s control over the world extends to all things except for evil, which occurs not by God’s design but only by his permission.²⁵ Such a view necessitates the admission that the entire created order from early in its existence has operated outside God’s purpose for it and the gamble of creation was lost by God (Romans 8:20, 21). This view of divine sovereignty, however, cannot be reconciled to the Biblical data. It would contradict God’s testimony about himself in Isaiah 44:24-28 as well as what is implied in the praise of heaven in Revelation 4:9-11.²⁶ Furthermore, if God chooses not to exercise His sovereign rights, then has He not in fact abdicated His throne? The Arminian view of sovereignty tends to lead to the conclusion that God is King in name only. But the God of the Bible is no figurehead; the God of the Bible is completely sovereign over all of creation, including over all the free choices of individual men. This in turn logically requires the doctrine of reprobation.

God's Character and Reprobation

Many have objected to the doctrine of reprobation on the basis of its alleged inconsistency with God's just and loving character. On the contrary, careful theological reflection reveals that reprobation does not threaten these attributes of God. So for instance, reprobation does not call into question God's justice. The biblical doctrine of reprobation does not describe God as decreeing to punish the innocent, nor does it describe God as actively corrupting good men in order to punish them. Rather, reprobation refers to that decree by which God predetermines to withhold saving grace from particular fallen individuals and predestines these to be condemned for the sins that they voluntarily commit from their own sinful nature. Thus, the *Second London Confession* rightly asserts regarding the reprobate:

As for those wicked and ungodly men, whom God as a righteous judge, for former sin doth blind and harden; from them he not only withholdeth his Grace, whereby they might have been enlightened in their understanding and wrought upon in their hearts; But sometimes also withdraweth the gifts which they had, and exposeth them to such objects as their corruptions makes occasion of sin; and withal gives them over to their own lusts, and the temptations of the world, and the power of Satan, whereby it comes to pass, that they harden themselves, even under those means which God useth for the softening of others.²⁷

As the statement makes clear, God does not reprobate righteous men, but men who are wicked and ungodly. By withholding saving grace from such men, God does not do them any injustice since grace is by its very nature undeserved. Likewise, God does not act unjustly when He blinds and hardens fallen individuals, for they deserve God's wrath by virtue of their natural ungodliness and sinful actions.

Reprobation is also compatible with God's love. Sinners who are left in their sin are still recipients of the general love that God has for all His creatures, though they do not experience His saving love which is reserved for the elect.²⁸ God's general love is real and should by itself elicit repentance (Romans 2:4). It is only due to human depravity that God's general love does not overcome men's enmity towards Him. God then sets a special kind of saving love on particular individuals in order to overcome their sinfulness, to bring them to faith and repentance, and to save them for His glory. This is a freely given love that God does not owe any sinful creature; thus, He is free to withhold it from whom He pleases. Those who suggest that God must love all His creatures in the same way force upon Him a requirement contrary both to Scripture and to human experience.

Reprobation and Christian Discipleship

I have argued thus far that reprobation is clearly taught in the Scriptures, is made necessary by God's sovereignty, and is consistent with God's character. In addition, I posit that reprobation furthers Christian discipleship. I say this for at least three reasons. First, the doctrine of reprobation tends to destroy human pride. In our conceit, we naturally assume that human beings are the center of the universe and that God exists to help us flourish. The doctrine of reprobation demonstrates however that God is central and that all human beings exist for the display of His glory. Thus, the doctrine of reprobation humbles believers like few other doctrines do. Second, by accepting the doctrine of reprobation, disciples foster a radical submission to the Word of God. All Christians are tempted to stand over the Bible and to force God's Word to conform to our own philosophical or moral judgments. But the doctrine of reprobation confronts our worldly ways of thinking and offends our natural sensibilities. It uniquely requires us to put aside our own presuppositions and to bow the knee before God's revelation. In so doing, reprobation teaches Christians to grow in their appreciation of and submission to the authority of the Bible.

Lastly, reprobation supports Christian discipleship by safeguarding the salvific exclusivity of the gospel. Every Christian needs to wrestle with the problem of the unevangelized. Many confessing Christians have responded to the issue by asserting the possibility of salvation apart from the conscious acceptance of the gospel. The reason this pertains to the discussion at hand is because the same impulses that lead to the rejection of reprobation also lead towards the denial of the salvific exclusivity of the gospel.²⁹ This explains why similar appeals are made to God's justice, God's love, and God's goodness in order to argue that the Lord could never condemn to hell individuals who were not afforded the opportunity to hear the gospel.³⁰ The doctrine of reprobation on the other hand teaches that God is free to withhold saving grace from sinners. It also declares that the reprobate serve a divine purpose: they demonstrate the glory of God's justice and highlight God's amazing grace towards the elect. In these ways then, the doctrine of reprobation strengthens Christian disciples. Thus, the framers of the *Second London Confession* were wise to defend the doctrine.

Conclusion

The doctrine of reprobation continues to trouble many Christians and to invite much controversy. Yet, faithfulness to the God of the Scriptures often requires theological courage. It requires Christians to receive all that the Scriptures teach, to accept the necessary implications of clear doctrines, and to trust that God's revelation is always consistent and beneficial. Thus, believers ought to receive the doctrine of reprobation as a matter of fidelity, even as the framers of the *Second London Confession* once did. Furthermore, Baptists should be thankful for the discussion of reprobation found in the *Second London Confession*. The confession contains an explication of the doctrine that is saturated in biblical fidelity, theological precision, and God-honoring conviction. I pray that many might continue to study these confessional articles so that they might learn to articulate and defend the doctrine of reprobation.

NOTES:

¹ *Second London Confession*, Chapter III, "Of God's Decree," par. III.

² *Ibid.*, Chapter III, "Of God's Decree," par. IV.

³ For discussions of reprobation, see John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 2, Library of Christian Classics (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 931; John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 221–24.

⁴ For a discussion of these figures and their acrimony towards predestination, see Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 6th ed., vol. 1, *The History of the Creeds* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1877), 474–77.

⁵ John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans. J. K. S. Reid (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 55.

⁶ William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, rev. ed. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1969), 339.

⁷ John Wesley, *Free Grace: A Sermon Preach'd at Bristol* (Bristol: S&F Farley, 1739), 22–24.

⁸ Some other texts that may teach or imply the doctrine of reprobation include Genesis 15:16, Deuteronomy 2:30, Joshua 11:20, 1 Samuel 2:25, 2 Samuel 16:10, 17:14, 1 Kings 22:20–23, 2 Chronicles 25:16, Isaiah 6:9–10, 29:9–10, 44:18, 63:17, Psalm 105:25, Proverbs 16:4, 22:14, Matthew 13:10–17, Mark 4:10–12, Luke 8:9–10, John 12:37–40, 1 Peter 2:7–8, and Jude 4.

⁹ The Scriptures refer to God hardening Pharaoh's heart nine times (Exodus 4:21, 7:3, 9:12, 10:1, 10:20, 10:27, 11:10, 14:4, 14:8), to God hardening the hearts of the Egyptians one time (Exodus 14:17),

to Pharaoh's heart being hardened six times, (Exodus 7:13, 7:14, 7:22, 8:19, 9:7, 9:35), and to Pharaoh hardening his own heart three times (Exodus 8:15, 8:32, 9:34). Furthermore, two of the texts (Exodus 7:13, 7:22) that simply mention that Pharaoh's heart was hardened also say that this hardening happened "as the LORD had said." For an extended defense of this view, see G. K. Beale, "An Exegetical and Theological Consideration of the Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart in Exodus 4-14 and Romans 9," *Trinity Journal* 5, no. 2 (1984): 129–54.

¹⁰ Exodus 10:1–2; unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture citations are from the ESV.

¹¹ John 13:18; see also Acts 1:16–20.

¹² John 17:12.

¹³ Mark 14:18–21; Matthew 26:20–25.

¹⁴ An extended discussion of Romans 9 goes beyond the scope of this article. For treatments from a similar perspective, see Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament 6 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1998), 478–523; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 570–609.

¹⁵ Romans 9:19–23.

¹⁶ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. John Owen, 500th Anniversary Edition, Calvin's Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009), 369.

¹⁷ The doctrine of unconditional election also requires reprobation by logical necessity. For a defense of this argument, see Geerhardus Vos, "The Biblical Importance of the Doctrine of Preterition," *The Presbyterian* 70, no. 36 (1900): 9–10.

¹⁸ *Second London Confession*, Chapter III, "Of God's Decree," par. I.

¹⁹ *Second London Confession*, Chapter V, "Of Divine Providence," par. IV.

²⁰ See for example Psalms 9:2–8, 47:7–8, 93:1–2, 103:19, 115:3, 135:6, Isaiah 6:1–3, 46:9–10, 66:1, Jeremiah 10:10, Daniel 4:34–34, Malachi 1:14, Matthew 28:18, Acts 4:24, Ephesians 1:11, 1 Timothy 6:15, Jude 1:25, and Revelation 6:10.

²¹ See for example Genesis 45:7–8, 50:20, Psalms 33:15, 139:1–4, 16, Proverbs 20:24, 21:1, Jeremiah 10:23, Ezra 1:1, 6:22, Acts 2:23, 4:27–28, and Philippians 2:13.

²² See 1 Peter 1:7–8.

²³ See Acts 16:6–10.

²⁴ Roger E. Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 123–24.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 120.

²⁶ The most striking example is set forth in Acts 4:27, 28. The murder of the Son of God must be considered the greatest evil ever committed. Yet, the New Testament writers clearly depict all the details of his death as occurring in accordance with divine design.

²⁷ *Second London Confession*, Chapter V, “Of Divine Providence,” par. VI.

²⁸ For a discussion of the different ways the Bible speaks of God’s love, see D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 16–21.

²⁹ Clark Pinnock states in fact that inclusivism should appeal to Christians because it “relieves us of those dark features of the tradition that suggest that (at worst) God plays favorites or (at best) inexplicably restricts his grace, so that whole groups are excluded from any possibility of salvation.” See Clark H. Pinnock, “An Inclusivist View,” in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 101. Walls and Dongell manifest similar tendencies. In their discussion of the fate of the unevangelized, they approvingly quote C.S. Lewis’ views on the possibility of salvation for those unreached by the gospel. They then make the claim that “the grace made available by Christ is extended to everyone through the work of the Holy Spirit, even if they live in times and places where the gospel is not explicitly preached.” See Jerry L. Walls and Joseph R. Dongell, *Why I Am Not a Calvinist* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 195.

³⁰ See John Hick, “Response to R. Douglas Geivett and W. Gary Phillips,” in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 246–50.

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Aaron Matherly

Like a Stone?

The Perfect Confluence of God's Providence and Human Freedom

John Wesley, the great revivalist preacher and founder of Methodism, objected in no uncertain terms to a Reformed understanding of God's eternal decrees and providence. In his *Thoughts Upon Necessity*, Wesley reproached the views expressed by the Westminster Divines and their understanding of a God whose decrees as fixed and immutable, and whose providence carrying out those decrees extends to the smallest, seemingly-insignificant areas of everyday life to matters concerning men's actions and eternal states. Although he referred to the Reformed view as "an exceeding ancient opinion," Wesley was not thereby suggesting its legitimacy. Just as Adam had blamed his sin on Eve and she had likewise credited her sin to the serpent, imputing one's actions to another is as old as humanity itself, says Wesley: "It is true, *I* did eat, but the cause of my eating, the spring of my action, was in *another*."¹ For Wesley, such erroneous thinking persisted from the fall to the Stoics, the Manicheans and eventually to the Calvinists of his day.²

Like the *Westminster Confession* after which it was modeled, Chapter III of the *Second London Confession* also provides a strong affirmation on God's eternal decrees: "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."³ Questions undoubtedly arise from this statement, and its authors anticipated possible objections with further clarifying remarks:

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.⁴

The statement addresses several interrelated questions that challenge its understanding of God's decrees and providence. In particular, this article will explore what the confession affirms about the relationship between God's providence and human freedom. The Reformed position found in the *Second London Baptist Confession*—particularly as it addresses God's sovereignty and human responsibility—stands up to common objections often levelled against it by critics. More importantly, however, this article will contend that the pages of Scripture confirm the Reformed position on these issues.

Wesley articulated his objection to the Reformed doctrine of providence, which for him negates any grounds for either blame or praise:

If all the passions, the tempers, the actions, of men are wholly independent on their own choice, are governed by a principle exterior to themselves, then there can be no moral good or evil. There can be neither virtue nor vice, neither good nor bad actions, neither good nor bad passions or tempers ... if all the passions and tempers of men are quite independent on their own choice, are governed by a principle exterior to themselves, then none of them is either rewardable or punishable, is either praise- or blame-worthy. The consequence is undeniable.⁵

Thus according to Wesley, the Reformed view provides little room for free agency. Given the Reformed position, "man can no more help sinning than a stone can help falling."⁶ Prior to Wesley, seventeenth-century General Baptist Thomas Grantham offered a similar critique in his *Christianismus Primitivus*:

When we say, that nothing comes to pass without God's providence. We do not mean (as some) That God hath eternally determined, and that unalterably, all things to be that have been, and that all things are determined by him which are; and that all things shall be, which shall be. For who dare once imagine that God would unchangeably decree, or decree at all? The manifold Acts of Villany that have been, are, and will yet be done in the World: this must unavoidly make him the Author of Sin, and Men, and Devils, the Executors only of his Decrees, which God forbid.⁷

For Grantham, the Reformed position does allow for blame, but the blame is ultimately placed on God as the author of sin.

Despite these challenges, Reformed theologians have maintained the reality of God's decrees, providence and human freedom and pointed to numerous passages in Scripture to defend their position. In his work *The Cause of God and Truth*, eighteenth-century Particular Baptist John Gill affirmed the Reformed view in part by appealing to Psalm 33:13–15 and Proverbs 21:1. Gill wrote:

Much of the providence of God lies in the government of men, in moving of their wills, and ordering of their actions, to bring about his great designs and his own glory. For, as he has made all things for himself, for his own glory, so he orders and disposes all things to answer to that end. ... And as he made and fashioned the hearts of all men, it is as certain that the hearts of all men are under his government, he can move, influence, and determine them to this and the other action at his pleasure without offering any violence to them.⁸

For Gill, denying God's government over the hearts of men would thereby shut out God's control "in the most considerable affairs and events of this lower world."⁹ On the contrary, Gill argued that God governed both the good and sinful actions of men, but in a way that does not injure the freedom of the individual. On this point, Gill merely reflected what the *Second London Confession* stated in its chapter on divine providence:

[God's] determinate Counsel extendeth itself even to the first fall, and all other sinful actions both of angels, and Men; (and not by bare permission) which also he most wisely and otherwise ordereth, and governeth, in a manifold dispensation to his most holy ends: yet so, as the sinfulness of their acts proceedeth only from the Creatures, and not from God; who being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be, the author or approver of sin.¹⁰

In order to reconcile God's eternal decrees, providence and man's freedom, Gill suggested that God simply acts in accordance with our own desires, whether for good or for evil. When God desires to influence men towards the good, wrote Gill, He "puts his own grace and goodness into them, or stirs up and excites what he had put there before."¹¹ Conversely, when God moves men to evil actions He does not do so by putting sinfulness into men or assist them in sinning; if that were the case, the Arminians could make a genuine charge that the Reformed position makes God the author of sin. Nevertheless, God does leave men to the desires of their own hearts: "[God] only leaves them to the sinfulness he finds, and moves the natural faculty of the will to these actions, not as sinful, but as natural."¹² In his *Abstract of Systematic Theology*, James Petigru Boyce mirrored Gill's conclusions:

[God's providence] does not forbid the use of inducements to any specific action, nor the placing of man in circumstances which would influence, or control his acts. ... But, wherever

they are only persuasive, so as to lead him to delight in or to choose a specific course of action, through his own good pleasure, liberty is preserved, and man is responsible for his choice.¹³

Thus, in His providence God may use various means to incline men towards one desired action or another, but in the end the choices are truly theirs and result from following the strongest inclinations of their hearts.

Numerous passages in Scripture bear witness to this truth. The prophet Isaiah revealed that God raised up the Assyrians against the Israelites as a means to punish the wickedness of His people:

Ah Assyria, the rod of my anger; the staff in their hands is my fury! Against a godless nation I send them, and against the people of my wrath I command him, to take spoil and seize plunder, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets.¹⁴

Although the king of Assyria attributed his conquest to his own strength and wisdom, Isaiah reminds his readers that God orchestrated the events and that the king was a mere means to an end: “Shall the axe boast over him who hews with it, or the saw magnify itself against him who wield it? As if a rod should wield him who lifts, it, or as if a staff should lift him who is not wood!”¹⁵ Even more startling than this revelation is that God intended to judge the very instrument He appointed to carry out His will: “When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish the speech of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria and the boastful look in his eyes.”¹⁶ Therefore, says theologian Bruce Ware:

The free and responsible actions of the Assyrians, as shown by their arrogant hearts conceiving and carrying out exactly what they most wanted to do, is fully compatible with God’s determination to raise up Assyria, commanding and sending them to do exactly what God willed that they do.¹⁷

Similarly, Gill appealed to Revelation 17:17 to further demonstrate the congruity between God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility. Although the kings freely hand over their kingdoms to the beast, God is the one who has “put it in their hearts to carry out his purpose.”¹⁸ In his commentary on Revelation, Gill reiterated that God did not steer their hearts by infusing sin into them, but by “giving them up to their own hearts’ lusts; stirring up, and moving upon their minds, and directing the motions of it, to such and such objects, which they readily and voluntarily fell in with.”¹⁹

Two other important passages in Scripture provide examples of the reality of both God's sovereignty and man's freedom. In his *Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, Gill not only asserted that God, in His perfect knowledge, foresaw the fall of Adam in Genesis 3, He also predetermined it since God's foreknowledge of the future "flows from the determinations of his will."²⁰ Nevertheless, wrote Gill: "[God] did not force or impel either Satan to tempt, or man to sin; they both acted their part freely, without any force or compulsion."²¹ Satan acted out of his own spite, malice and envy, and, said Gill, "none of Adam's sons and daughters ever ate a heartier meal, and with more good will, or with greater gust, than our first parents ate the forbidden fruit."²²

Furthermore, Gill determined that the necessary corollary to Adam's fall was God's predetermined plan of redemption. Speaking to his Israelite brethren in Acts 2:23, Peter notes that "this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men." Later on, the believers in Jerusalem elaborate further on God's sovereign plan:

For truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.²³

God did not merely permit the crucifixion, but, as Luke makes clear, God foreordained the very means by which this would take place. Commenting on this passage, Gill reaffirmed that the wicked men freely chose to betray and crucify Christ:

It was not their intention and design, to fulfill the purposes and decrees of God, but to fulfill their own lusts, and satiate their rage and malice against him ... what they wickedly did, God designed for good, and hereby brought about the redemption and salvation of his people.²⁴

Like the Assyrian king, those involved in Christ's crucifixion were not absolved from responsibility because they were instruments in carrying out God's decree; the designation "lawless men" bears witness to their guilt. The wicked men acted freely in carrying out their plot against Christ, yet through their free actions God was accomplishing His plan to redeem His people.

Importantly, as Ware notes, God's providence works no less towards good ends, and God's gracious works in the lives of His elect especially demonstrated this:

Here is the marvel and miracle of God's gracious effectual calling and the new birth. Whereas before we were born again, our highest inclinations were always, in one form or another, to

turn from God and reject the gospel of Christ and the renewing work of the Spirit, God brings about in His elect a new heart and manifests a new strongest inclination and deepest desire to turn from sin to the very Christ we formerly despised.²⁵

God's effectual calling and the Spirit's work of regeneration do not act by means of compulsion, but rather they direct men's affections towards the Savior. Additionally, God's providence also extends to those means which preserve the believer. In a sermon on Philippians 2:12–13, Basil Manly Sr. discussed the relationship between God's action and man's responsibility. Paul informs believers to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you for his good pleasure." Manly noted that while "it is the power of God which quickens, which implants the life," men must also work out their salvation "by cultivating the principle of grace, and conducting it through all the different stages of growth and Christian experience."²⁶ Of course, one of the most important means by which God accomplishes His ends is through the proclamation of the gospel. Errol Hulse warns against neglecting God's means:

There is the most obvious danger of all which is to make the wrong conclusion that since grace is sovereignly given then we can leave it all to God and relax. The truth is that grace is given through human means. It is most significant that the truth of Romans which stresses the necessity of preaching the Gospel is found between the ninth and eleventh chapters which declare God's omnipotent sovereignty. Paul and the master he served both declared the sovereignty of God. Neither neglected the necessity of hard work and the maximum use of the means of grace by which sovereign grace comes to men.²⁷

Conclusion

Although the foregoing discussion on God's decrees and providence is an important one, it can easily overshadow what the confession further concludes *from* the doctrines, namely, that they declare God's infinite wisdom, power and faithfulness. In other words, affirmations about God's works directs us towards affirmations about His character. Gill remarked that "[God's] decrees are laid in the deepest wisdom; which, though unsearchable by us, and may be unaccountable to us; yet there is, as the apostle expresses it, speaking of them, 'a depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God in them.'"²⁸ Likewise, nineteenth-century Baptist theologian J. L. Dagg echoed Gill:

The purpose of God is infinitely wise. ... God must have a purpose because he is wise; and, therefore, his wisdom must be concerned in his purpose. It is not an arbitrary or capricious

scheme; but one devised by infinite wisdom, having the best possible end to accomplish, and adopting the best possible means for its accomplishment.²⁹

Far from being fatalistic, the Reformed understanding of God's decrees and providence reveals the great care God has for His creation and that nothing—even the greatest of tribulations—are outside of God's all-wise plans and control. Consequently, believers can trust that “for those who love God all things work together for good, for those called according to his purpose.”³⁰ Furthermore, believers can have confidence that God's appointed means, whether for salvation, sanctification or evangelism and missions, will successfully accomplish His desired ends, namely, that “those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.”³¹ The great truths expressed in the *Second London Confession* comforted Baptists facing persecution at the time of its writing, and should offer no less encouragement for Baptists over three hundred years later when the media reports daily of immeasurable calamity, wickedness and the rise and fall of nations. For the godly man, noted Calvin, “His solace ... is to know that his Heavenly Father so holds all things in his power, so rules by his authority and will, so governs by his wisdom, that nothing can befall except he determine it.”³² The *Second London Confession* reminds us that an all-wise, all-powerful God is directing all things towards His appointed ends, and as such the confession remains an invaluable expression of the perfect confluence of divine decrees, providence and choices of the human will.

NOTES:

¹ John Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Necessity*, in *John Wesley*, ed. Albert Outler (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1964), 479.

² Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Necessity*, 479–480.

³ William L. Lumpkin and Bill J. Leonard, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 2nd revised ed. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2011), 238.

⁴ Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 238.

⁵ Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Necessity*, 480–481.

⁶ Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Necessity*, 480.

⁷ Thomas Grantham, *Christianismus Primitivus* (London: Francis Smith, 1678), 51–52.

⁸ John Gill, *The Cause of God and Truth* (London: W. H. Collingridge, 1185; reprint ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980), 205.

⁹ Gill, *The Cause of God and Truth*, 205.

¹⁰ Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 242.

¹¹ Gill, *The Cause of God and Truth*, 205.

¹² Gill, *The Cause of God and Truth*, 206.

¹³ James P. Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2006), 224.

¹⁴ Isaiah 10:5–6 (ESV). All Scripture quotations are taken from the ESV.

¹⁵ Isaiah 10:15.

¹⁶ Isaiah 10:12.

¹⁷ Bruce Ware, “The Compatibility of Determinism and Human Freedom,” in *Whomever He Wills: A Surprising Display of Sovereign Mercy*, ed. Matthew Barret and Tom Nettles (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2012), 217.

¹⁸ Revelation 17:17.

¹⁹ John Gill, *Exposition of the Old and New Testaments*, 9 vols. (Paris, AR: The Baptist Standard Bearer, 1989), 9:828.

²⁰ John Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 2 vols. (London: Printed for W. Winterbotham, 1796), 1:465.

²¹ Gill, *Body of Divinity*, 464.

²² Ibid.

²³ Acts 4:27–28.

²⁴ John Gill, *Exposition of the Old and New Testaments*, 8:176.

²⁵ Ware, “The Compatibility of Determinism and Human Freedom,” 229.

²⁶ Basil Manly Sr., in *Southern Baptist Sermons on Sovereignty and Responsibility*, ed. Tom Nettles (Harrisonburg, VA: Gano Books, 1984), 9.

²⁷ Errol Hulse, *The Believer's Experience: Maintaining the Scriptural Balance Between Experience and Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1980), 54.

²⁸ Gill, *Body of Divinity*, 256; c.f. Romans 11:33.

²⁹ Dagg, *Manual of Theology*, 103.

³⁰ Romans 8:28.

³¹ Romans 8:29.

³² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeil and trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1967), 1:224.:

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Fred Malone

The High Mystery of Predestination

Chapter III, The Decree of God paragraph 7

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. (1 Thessalonians 1:4, 5; 2 Peter 1:10; Ephesians 1:6; Romans 11:33; Romans 11:5, 6, 20; Luke 10:20)

Our Lord Jesus Christ possessed a perfect knowledge of God's truth as well as a perfect understanding of the hearts to whom He spoke (John 16:30; John 2:25).¹ Yet, on the way to the cross, He told His disciples that he had many things yet to teach them which they could not bear at that time (John 16:12). One has to consider the condition of the hearer when teaching God's truth (2 Timothy 2:23-25). Jesus was ever the pastor who taught the truth while considering others' understanding and spiritual condition.

In like manner, our forefathers added the pastoral seventh paragraph to *Chapter III: the Decree of God*. It cautions that one must have "prudence and care" in how one teaches the high mystery of predestination.

The following exposition of this paragraph will include: (1) the teaching of predestination considered; (2) the reasoning for such a consideration; and (3) the expected effect upon the believer in predestination.

The Teaching of Predestination Considered

This paragraph enjoins the actual teaching of the “high mystery of predestination.” It must be handled. It cannot be ignored by those ordained to teach the Word of God. And it must be taught in the manner which Scripture enjoins its teaching. To whom should it be taught? How should it be applied? What should be the effect upon the believer in it? How should it be handled with “special prudence and care?”

Those who would use the caution of “special prudence and care” to avoid teaching the biblical doctrine of predestination find no refuge here. Pastors are called to teach the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:17; Jude 3; 2 Timothy 2:1-2). To avoid teaching this major doctrine in Scripture is to violate pastoral responsibility. To teach it erroneously does harm Christ’s sheep. Predestination must be handled.

However, the teaching of predestination must not be entered without prior “special prudence and care.” Some have taught others with a brash, argumentative spirit; this undermines the very concept of a predestination moved by the undeserved grace and kindness of God (Ephesians 1:4-6).

Yet, it is true that this “high mystery” is difficult for many to understand, even with the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 3:16). It is not a secret doctrine only for the intelligentsia, for it is expounded openly for all both in the Old and New Testaments. In fact, predestination is the very foundation of all prophecy and fulfillment. However, there are some mysterious issues about this doctrine which defy human reason fully to understand.

For instance, how can one explain the mystery of the absolute sovereignty of God over all things in His decree (Daniel 4:34-35; Ephesians 1:11; Romans 8:28) yet harmonize it with the biblical truth of the unforced will of spiritually dead men freely to respond to the gospel when they are regenerated (Genesis 50:20; Ephesians 2:4-5)? To harmonize the sovereignty of God and full human responsibility to repent and believe is like trying to explain the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture. It is wholly inspired by God yet written through the minds of fallible men. Such mysteries humble us and call teachers to use

prudence (wisdom applied) and care (careful teaching with care for the hearer) in their teaching of the “high mystery of predestination.” We must neither ignore nor speculate about God’s revelation to make it more palatable to ourselves or others.

Chapter III describes election as God’s eternal decree to choose sinners as gifts given to Christ who would accomplish their salvation, including giving them the lost ability to understand and believe the gospel (John 6:37-39, 17:1-3; Ephesians 2:8-9). Having predestined all things to save His elect, including the sending of His gospel to them, God regenerates them by the Holy Spirit, “to which the sinner responds in repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.”² This faith of God’s elect is the consequence of regeneration, not its predecessor ...which some wrongly teach as the condition of eternal election (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Therefore, God predestines the life of His elect from eternity past to their eternity future in glory (Romans 8:29-30). The internal effectual calling (vocation) of God’s elect comes through the external call of the gospel of Christ to all people without exception (Luke 24:47). However, because of their natural spiritual deadness, the elect must be born again by the Holy Spirit to receive that Word and to respond in repentance and faith. If God in His sovereign grace had not predestined their regeneration, creating faith in them, no one would be saved.

Therefore, the “high mystery of predestination” in no way hinders either evangelism or missions or the calling to all men everywhere to repent and to believe the gospel. As Paul told the Gentile philosophers on Mars Hill:

“Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, *God is now* declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent...” (Act 17:30).

The fact is that predestination makes evangelism certain on two counts. First, it guarantees the preacher that God will save sinners from every tongue, tribe race, and nation through the proclamation of the gospel to all men (Revelation 5:9-10). If one keeps preaching, someone will be saved. And, second, predestination promises the preacher that he can justly call all men to repent and believe because the electing God always keeps His Word:

for “WHOEVER WILL CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED” (Romans 10:13).

These two great truths of God’s predestination of His elect and God’s just command to all men to respond to the gospel of Christ is perfectly reconciled in God’s mind but is still a

“high mystery” to our puny minds. Still, this “high mystery of predestination” still must be taught because it is in Scripture—yet with prudence and care.

The Reasoning for Teaching Predestination Explained

After introducing the necessity and manner of teaching predestination, our forefathers explained the reasoning for teaching predestination with these words:

...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;...

Some objections to teaching predestination are (1) that one may so wrestle with whether they were elected by God before the foundation of the world that they may never attain assurance of salvation; (2) that if one believes only the elect are predestined to salvation, then they may not respond to the call to salvation, and (3) that believers may not pursue obedience to God’s commandments in their life because they are eternally elect and cannot be lost no matter what they do.

But notice who should be assured by the teaching of predestination. It is not those who presume upon God’s grace and let their sin abound (Romans 6:1-2), but those “attending” to the Word of God and “yielding obedience” to it in their lives (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14; see also Matthew 7:31-23). These should have a certainty about their eternal election (Ephesians 1:4; 2 Timothy 1:9; John 6:37-39) because they bear the evidence of effectual calling in their heart and life (1 John 2:3-6). Those who rightly understand biblical predestination would never use it as an excuse to refuse God’s promise of salvation by faith alone in Christ alone; nor would they use it to refuse an obedient life to their God of grace.

In fact, Jesus and His Apostles taught that election brings greater assurance to believers and stimulates them to pursue holiness with a greater zeal (Colossians 3:12). They no longer have to look to their own power and perfections to convince themselves they are saved. Under electing grace, they can keep looking to Christ’s unchanging love and power to “keep you from falling and to make you stay in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy...” (Jude 24).

Even to those believers who go through great trials and spiritual warfare with sin, the doctrine of election and predestination brings comfort and perseverance:

Providence, Chapter II, Paragraph 5. The most wise, righteous, and gracious God doth oftentimes leave for a season his own children to manifold temptations and the corruptions of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled; and to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon himself; and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and for other just and holy ends.

So that whatsoever befalls any of his elect is by his appointment, for his glory, and their good.

(2 Chron. xxxii. 25,26,31; 2 Cor. xii. 7-9. Rom. viii. 28).

Those believers who attend to the will of God and yield obedience to Him may know that their effectual calling from God is true and also that they are the undeserved objects of God's eternal election and predestination. This motivates their thankful worship and obedient life, no matter their earthly circumstances (Romans 8:28-39).

The Resulting Effect of Predestination upon the Believer

The final statement describes the effect which a right handling of predestination will have upon the one who believes it for himself:

...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.

When Peter and John were released from custody by God's power, the disciples attributed their release to God's predestination, so clearly seen in Christ's betrayal and death. This fueled their praise:

"For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur" (Acts 4:27-28).

This was the praise and worship of believers who understood predestination.

However, one must remember that election and predestination were not preached to the unconverted in the evangelistic messages of Acts. This was not part of the gospel message to sinners.³ The sovereignty of God over all things and in the world was

preached to sinners to establish His authority to judge them for their sins, thus calling all to repentance and faith in Christ:

“Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead” (Acts 17:30–31).

On the horizontal plane, God calls all men everywhere to repent because they are already guilty, condemned, and under obligation to be reconciled to their Sovereign Maker and Judge (John 3:18, 36). Election and predestination do not enter into that part of presenting the gospel message.

But on the vertical plane, Christ and His Apostles instruct believers that they know God only because God the Father chose them in Christ before the foundation of the world so they might be holy and without blame before Him (Ephesians 1:4, 2:1-10). The predestination of believers is the foundation for many comforting truths which result in praise and admiration of God Himself. To think that such a great and holy God would decree to set His love upon “me” in Christ before the foundation of the world so creates an awe-inspired humility that one desires to obey this God of grace in all of life. This is not works-based repayment for the gift of eternal life. It is the sincere gratitude of returned love to the One who first loved “me.”

This attitude is true revival. It can only come through the teaching of predestination with prudence and care.

Summary

Paragraph seven of God’s Decree is the pastoral application to pastors who are called to teach “the whole counsel of God” to God’s people (2 Timothy 2:1-2). Such a “high mystery of predestination” must be taught the people of God in full and handled with prudence and care. This doctrine is not meant to be part of the gospel preaching which God designed to call all men everywhere to repent and obey Him. Yet, to know afterward as a believer that God was seeking you when you were seeking Him; to know that it is not that you found Christ but that Christ found you; to know that God had always planned to save you and overcome your fallen, spiritually dead nature to give you spiritual life that desires to come to Christ for salvation; to know that the Father always loved you, that Christ came to rescue

you for Himself upon the Cross, and to know that the desire of your heart to seek eternal life was the Holy Spirit raising you from spiritual death to walk out of the tomb into the light of Christ's love, forgiveness, and undeserved blessings; ...to know all these things and many more besides impels the saved sinner to believe the love God has for us (1 John 4:19). Believing in such unconditional eternal love to the guilty, the forgiven ones find themselves "looking unto Jesus" each day with a thanksgiving that resists temptation and is filled with such love for such love given that obedience is a small thing to give to please the One who is so good.

NOTES:

¹ *New American Standard Bible*. (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation), 1973. All Scripture quotations will be from the New American Standard Bible.

² *The Baptist Faith and Message* (Nashville, TN: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 2000), IV-A. "Regeneration...is a change of heart wrought by the Holy Spirit through conviction of sin, to which the sinner responds in repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ."

³ J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press), 68-69, 98-100.

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Tom Nettles

Book Review

The Gospel Heritage of Georgia Baptists: 1772–1830

The Gospel Heritage of Georgia Baptists: 1772-1830. by Brandon F. Smith and Kurt M. Smith. Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2016.

Reviewed by Tom Nettles

This book is both timely and timeless. It is timely in that it contributes to the subject matter of this series of *Founders Journal* presentations on the historical confessional theology of Baptists as set forth in the *Second London Confession*. Especially pertinent is its clear statements on the matter of God's decrees. Another aspect of its timeliness is the evidentiary documentation it provides for a public disagreement on the place of Separate Baptists in the make-up of historical Southern Baptist doctrinal expression. Public statements of *opinion* widely differ; but this is not the presentation of undocumented opinion (claimed as "settled fact"), but well-documented, clearly presented offering in denominational history that should go a long way toward settling the historical doctrinal part of the discussion. The timeless aspect of the book is that it is not designed simply to enter into a present-day discussion on an issue of passing importance. Instead, it gives voice to the way in which divine truth captured the corporate consciousness of zealous, self-forgetful proclaimers of eternal truth, divinely revealed about God's intervention through grace in humanity's path to a zealously embraced eternal death. What could be of greater immediate importance and lasting impact?

In summary, the thesis argued is that the origin and rapid growth of Baptist churches in Georgia involved the cooperation of both Separate Baptists and Regular Baptists in a common commitment to church planting, church purity, church discipline, and confessional fidelity. Their doctrinal commitment was uniform whether arising from Sandy Creek or Charleston. So demonstrate the authors based on closely connected historical records.

Three biographies constitute the first half of the book and the last half is composed of a historical doctrinal study of the various associations among Georgia Baptists. Daniel Marshall (1706-1784), Abraham Marshall (1748-1819), and Jesse Mercer (1769-1841) provide the matter for discussion of the pastoral aspect of this intriguing story. Daniel Marshall, mediocre in gifts, but irrepressible in zeal, courage, and sound judgment set the tone with his spirit, determination, love of God, love of sinners, and love of truth. Having been instrumental in planting churches in three other southern states he gave the last fourteen years of his life to making a dent in the hardened religious soul of a persecuting state-churchism and brought with him the confessional evangelical Calvinism of the Sandy Creek Separate Baptists. His son, Abraham Marshall continued that work and had to fend off an attempt to disrupt the confessional unity of the churches through an anti-Calvinist incursion led by Jeremiah Walker. Walker's movement was rejected, he was excluded from the association, and his non-Calvinist association of four churches endured for about half a decade. The Confession of Faith written by the Georgia Baptist Association in the teeth of this challenge was a clear, and forcefully articulated statement of historical Calvinist soteriology, Trinitarian orthodoxy, and Baptist ecclesiology. This confession is referred to frequently throughout because of the importance of its defining and disciplinary function among Georgia Baptists during the years covered in this book. Jesse Mercer emerged as perhaps the single most influential figure among the Baptists in the first half of the nineteenth century. His nurturing of a denominational witness organized for missions, his opposition to the "do-nothing" mentality of the Primitive Baptists, his example of pastoral fidelity, his personal stature in godliness, and his intentional perseverance in confessional doctrine, arguing for the leading points of Calvinist soteriology are given an irrefutable documentation.

After the discussion of each person, several lessons for pastoral ministry are distilled. These lessons are not mere shallow and superficial suggestions but arise from mature pastoral insight concerning the strengths of each of the three persons examined.

The doctrinal section is divided into five sections corresponding to the five doctrines resisted by the Remonstrants, the systematizers of the teachings of James Arminius.

Subtitles to each doctrine are: “What has man done?” (Total Depravity); “What has the Father done? (Unconditional Election); “What has the Son done?” (Particular Atonement); “What has the Spirit done?” (Efficacious Grace); “What have the saints done?” (Perseverance of the Saints). Each chapter ties the doctrine under discussion to its historic development. Then its articulation within the churches and associations of Georgia Baptists is demonstrated through the confessional position of the associations, the circular letters presented through the associations, sermons preached at associational meetings, articles published in papers, and the published sermons of several Georgia Baptist preachers. The documentation is rich and diverse and the conclusions are unvarnished and strong that all five points of Calvinism were held and preached by Georgia during the years (and for many years afterwards). This message was a seal to their humility, life to their souls, zeal for their preaching, assurance for their evangelism, and fuel for their pursuit of holiness. The claim has been recently, reiterating a story-line that has often been repeated, that “These Sandy Creek Baptists were known as the Separate Baptists whose views mirror what is referred to as the ‘traditionalist’ perspective within the Southern Baptist Convention today.” This reviewer would be glad to see the documentation of that claim and has himself presented strong evidence to the contrary (See “Here’s the Point: Calvinists and Non-Calvinists in the SBC”). This book puts cold hard facts arising from primary sources that demonstrate that such a claim is a mere invention, an unfounded hope, a wish to the tooth fairy, or perhaps a request to the genie of Aladdin’s lamp. It is an assertion appearing from nothing, a decontextualized extrapolation from the flimsiest of evidence. Brandon and Kurt Smith have given us labor well-invested in putting before our eyes the true state of the doctrinal convictions and resultant spiritual affections of Georgia Baptist in their vibrant and courageous beginnings.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER:

Tom Nettles has most recently served as the Professor of Historical Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.