



the **CALVIN** **orum**

Realistic Idealism
An Editorial

Jesus and Christmas
In Philosophers' Hands

The Westminster Standards
Their Theology

Labor Issues
Scripture Teaching

Evolutionism
Among University Students

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A YEAR**

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The Theology of the Westminster Standards

John Murray
Professor of Systematic Theology
Westminster Theological Seminary

THE Westminster Assembly was wholly British in its composition. It should not, however, be thought that these British divines of the seventeenth century pursued their task and framed the standards of which they were the authors in aloof indifference to the Reformed churches on the continent of Europe. The very task assigned to the Assembly by ordinance of the English Parliament was in terms of the resolution on the part of the Lords and Commons that a government should "be settled in the Church as may be most agreeable to God's holy word, and most apt to procure and preserve the peace of the Church at home, and nearer agreement with the Church of Scotland, and other Reformed Churches abroad." Dr. S. W. Carruthers in his recent book, *The Everyday Work of the Westminster Assembly* informs us that as early as November 15, 1643, Alexander Henderson, one of the Scottish commissioners, reminded the divines that the "Continental churches were interestedly watching them, and that it was desirable that they should try to avoid giving offence or prejudice to them" (p. 36). Much evidence might be adduced to show the extent to which the divines at Westminster were acquainted with the best product of Reformed thought in churches outside the British Isles. It can be said in the words of B. B. Warfield that "it belonged to the historical situation of the Westminster Divines that their doctrinal work should take much the form of a consensus of the Reformed theology" (*The Westminster Assembly and its Work*, p. 159). The Theology of the Westminster Standards then is the Reformed theology.

This rather obvious though necessary characterization of the theology of Westminster is no adequate assessment of the unsurpassed formulation of that theology embodied in these Standards, especially in the Confession and Catechisms. The Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was peculiarly prolific in the production of Confessions of Faith, as also of Catechisms. It was an age of ardent and polemic faith and the framing of creeds was the natural result. Nearly all of these creeds are notable and valuable exhibitions of Christian truth, and not a few of them are of priceless value. But the Westminster Confession and Catechisms are the last in the series of these great Reformation creeds. The rich repertory of Protestant confessional statement, covering more than a

hundred years, was the heritage of the Westminster divines. It not only fell to their lot to compare, to sift and to evaluate in the light of more than a century of faithful and devoted labour on the part of others but it was also their disposition and determination to do so.

Of even greater significance is the fact that no other Protestant or Reformed confession had brought to bear upon its composition such a combination of devotion, care, patience and erudition as was exhibited in the work of the Westminster Assembly.

The Westminster Confession and Catechisms, therefore, are the mature fruit of the whole movement of creed-formation throughout fifteen centuries of Christian history. In particular, they are the crown of the greatest age of confessional exposition, the Protestant Reformation. No other similar documents have concentrated in them, and formulated with such precision, so much of the truth deposited in the Christian revelation.

A System of Truth

A necessary feature of any adequate creedal exhibition of the Christian Faith is coherent and systematic presentation. The attempt to set forth the truth systematically does not imply that the human mind can comprehend the whole counsel of God revealed in the Scriptures nor that all the truth revealed in Scripture can be brought within the compass of any creed framed by men. Such pretension has never been the presupposition of creed-formation either Catholic, Protestant or Reformed. But the great Protestant creeds and especially the Reformed do rest upon the principle that the Scripture revelation is not a series of unrelated and disjointed disclosures of the divine mind and will but an organism characterized by unity and harmony, that the Scripture contains a corpus of truth revealed by God to man that does not alter its character with the changes of human history nor depend for its validity upon the votes of fluctuating human judgment. The divines sitting at Westminster regarded it as their business to elicit from the Scripture the system of truth set forth therein, and this is just saying that they regarded it as their task to exhibit in orderly, logical and systematic fashion the system of truth they found God had deposited in the holy Scripture.

In the first chapter of the Confession they enunciated three principles indispensable to this conception of their task, namely, the *unity*, *sufficiency* and *finality* of Scripture. The *unity* is expressly stated in Section V in the phrase, "the consent of all the parts" and underlies the statement of Section IX: "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one) it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly." The *sufficiency* is stated in Section VI: "The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men." And the *finality* is expressed in Section I when it is said that it pleased the Lord, afterwards, to commit the revelation and declaration of His will "wholly unto writing: which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing His will unto His people being now ceased."

It would not be proper to claim that no inconsistency whatsoever could be found in the Confession and Catechisms. But any fair examination of these will show that, in the whole range of Christian confessional literature, they are unsurpassed for the closely knit co-ordination of the various chapters and questions and for the finely articulated development and statement of the subjects with which these chapters and questions deal.

An example, perhaps not the most important but in any case characteristic and interesting, will be found in the Confession. It concerns the order of the chapters and the definition of the topics that deal with the application of redemption. The order of the chapters is as follows: Effectual Calling, Justification, Adoption, Sanctification, Faith, Repentance, Good Works, Perseverance, Assurance of Salvation. The theology of the Confession would not have been in the least affected if the order followed had been that of any form of the *Ordo Salutis* adopted by Reformed theologians. It appears, however, that very good reasons dictated the order of topics actually followed. The Confession deals first with those aspects of the application of redemption which are the actions of God, Effectual Calling, Justification and Adoption as acts of God and Sanctification as a progressive work wrought by the Word and Spirit of God. The remaining five deal particularly with the response of the regenerate spirit of man to the redemption that is in Christ. It is surely significant that the divines gave the priority in the order of statement to those phases which signalize and express the activity of God with reference to and in His people.

The order of the topics, however, evinces another consideration that must have weighed with the

divines in this case, a consideration that brings to the forefront their conception of the logical relations that the specific actions of God in the application of redemption sustained to one another and to the other elements of the plan of salvation.

The chapter on Effectual Calling begins thus: "All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, He is pleased in His appointed and accepted time effectually to call, by His Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death, in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ." Here Effectual Calling is tied to predestination and made rigidly coextensive with it. Predestination is the source of the effectual call, just as the work of Christ is its ground, the Word the means and the Holy Spirit the agent.

The chapter on Justification, following that on Effectual Calling, begins by saying, "Those whom God effectually calleth, He also freely justifieth." Thus Justification is tied to Effectual Calling and, since Effectual Calling is tied to predestination, Justification is also.

Adoption, the next in the order of topics, is tied to Justification when it is said, "All those that are justified, God vouchsafeth, in and for His only Son Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption."

Finally, Sanctification is not directly attached to Adoption but to Effectual Calling. "They who are effectually called and regenerated, having a new heart and a new spirit created in them, are further sanctified." The reason for this break in the sequence, so far as express statement is concerned, is rather apparent. Sanctification has to do with the progressive renewal of man's subjective condition. The logically prior phase of the application of redemption that stands in the closest and most appropriate relation to subjective sanctification is the creation of the new heart and the new spirit. Since the Confession does not have a separate chapter on regeneration but rather subsumes it under Effectual Calling, it is natural that Sanctification should be brought into collocation, so far as actual definition is concerned, with Effectual Calling rather than with Adoption or Justification. The logical conjunction of all these phases of God's action is not, however, in the least disturbed. The interlocking is just as securely affirmed by attaching Sanctification to Effectual Calling as by attaching it to Adoption, for Effectual Calling is already conjoined with Justification and Justification with Adoption.

What must be carefully noted is that the order adopted serves to throw into prominent relief the indissoluble coordination of these various phases of the application of redemption and manifests the jealousy the divines had for the consistent application of the principle stated in Chapter VIII, Section VIII, "To all those for whom Christ hath purchased redemption, He doth certainly and effectually apply and communicate the same." It also shows their jealousy not only for the water-tight particularism

of the application of redemption but also for the exhibition of that particularism in the very order and terms of their formulation. In a word, it is evidence that they were careful to express the coextensiveness of predestination, impetration and application.

The Sovereign Pleasure of God

The careful reader of the Westminster Confession will observe the frequency with which the phrase, "it pleased God," or its equivalent, occurs in the early chapters. It is, as has been said, one of the inextinguishable marks of the Confession and belongs to its fundamental type of doctrine.

The phrase, "it pleased the Lord," occurs in the first section of the Confession. In dealing with the insufficiency of the light of nature and the works of creation and providence to give that knowledge of God and of His will necessary to salvation the Confession proceeds, "Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal Himself, and to declare that His will unto His Church." The need for such revelation inheres in the insufficiency of the revelation in nature. But by the phrase, "it pleased the Lord," the divines are very careful to maintain that the need did not of itself necessitate the revelation. The revelation requisite for salvation finds its source in the sovereign good pleasure of God. It was not inherently necessary for God to meet the need created by man's sin. It is also to be marked that not only is God's sovereign good pleasure made to cover the giving of the revelation sufficient unto salvation; it is also made to cover the inscripturation of the revelation. In the structure of the sentence the opening words, "Therefore it pleased the Lord," govern the clause "to commit the same wholly unto writing" as well as the two preceding clauses coordinate with it.

We thus see at the very outset what stress the divines laid upon the sovereign good pleasure of God in the whole matter of the salvation of lost men. That same principle is consistently maintained and unfolded throughout the ensuing chapters. But the second sentence of the Confession advises us that it is the fundamental premise of the confessional teaching with reference to the plan of salvation.

The decrees of God have to do with God's design and plan with reference to existence distinct from Himself. It is important to hold that with respect to the conception and plan of things existing distinct from God Himself there was no necessity arising from the nature or perfection of God. That anything is decreed to exist distinct from God, who is of Himself existent and to Himself sufficient, is due to the free, wise and holy counsel of His own will. The Confession begins its exposition of the decree of God with the statement of this truth. "God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchange-

ably ordain whatsoever comes to pass" (Chap. III, Sect. I).

This sovereign good pleasure of God is thrown into special prominence in the same chapter in sections V and VII. The former reads: "Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to His eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of His will, hath chosen, in Christ, unto everlasting glory, out of His mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving Him thereunto: and all to the praise of His glorious grace." Section VII deals with the foreordination of men to death and reads: "The rest of mankind God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of His own will, whereby He extendeth or withholdeth mercy, as He pleaseth, for the glory of His sovereign power over His creatures, to pass by; and to ordain them to dishonour and wrath, for their sin, to the praise of His glorious justice." The emphasis upon the sovereign good pleasure of God is so sustained in both of these sections that no one can miss or mistake it.

As to Reprobation

The latter section, however, merits some consideration, if not elucidation. It is apparent that this section sets forth the two sides of God's decree with reference to the non-elect of mankind—to pass them by, on the one hand, and to ordain them to dishonour and wrath, for their sin, on the other. Few sections of the Confession manifest greater theological exactness, indeed finesse, than this one. It breaks up the elements contained in the pregnant clause of section III, "and others fore-ordained to everlasting death," insofar as this clause applies to the non-elect of mankind.

There have been and are those who wish to make the decree of reprobation a purely judicial act of God. This is generally motivated by revulsion from the thought of any sovereign discrimination between men on the part of God. The differences in the ultimate destiny of men are supposed to find their whole explanation in the determinations that arise from men themselves, that in the matter of salvation the differences among men rest upon differences in men themselves. The Westminster divines, on the contrary, show peculiar care to stress the sovereign good pleasure of God in the decree of reprobation as in the decree of election—"God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of His own will, whereby He extendeth or withholdeth mercy, as He pleaseth."

The insistence upon the absolute sovereignty of God does not, however, obliterate a very important distinction. The decree of reprobation, as we noted, includes two sides, the passing by and the ordaining to dishonour and wrath. It will be observed that the words, "to pass by," are not in any way modi-

fied, whereas the words, "to ordain them to dishonour and wrath," are modified by the words, "for their sin." The distinction is all-important. The precision of the Confession is masterly. It is not because men are sinners that they are passed by. If that were the case, then all men would be passed by. It is, however, because the non-elect are sinners that they are ordained to dishonour and wrath. To state the matter otherwise, sin is not the ground upon which some are passed by and are therefore non-elect: but sin is the ground of the dishonour and wrath to which they are ordained. The passing by rests upon the sovereign good pleasure of God—He may extend or withhold mercy as He pleases. But dishonour and wrath presuppose ill-desert. Wrath is always the wages of guilt and guilt is the consequence of sin. In other words, dishonour and wrath have always their judicial ground in sin and condemnation.

"God Was Pleased"

The construction of this section, however, requires one further observation. The words, "God was pleased," govern "to ordain them to dishonour and wrath, for their sin" as well as "to pass by." This would seem to perplex the simplicity and force of the distinction noted above, and it has sometimes escaped the notice of some Reformed commentators of the Confession. But again the jealousy with which the divines maintained the principle of God's sovereign will comes to light. The sovereign good pleasure of God is alone operative in the passing by. But in the ordination to dishonour and wrath *both* the sovereign good pleasure *and* the judicial condemnation of God are operative. The ground of dishonour and wrath is truly sin and sin *alone*, but the reason why *they*, the non-elect, are ordained to such dishonour and wrath, when others equally sinful and hell-deserving are not, is the sovereign will of God. We thus discover that, while the distinction between the ground of passing by and the ground of ordaining to dishonour and wrath is distinctly and eloquently drawn, the sovereign will of God is not denied its proper sphere of operation in the eternal condemnation of the reprobate. And sober analysis of the question will again vindicate the construction that the divines chose to adopt.

There are several other instances of the occurrence of such words as "God was pleased" that are worthy of extended discussion. Space will permit of reference to only one more. It occurs in the chapter on Creation. This chapter begins thus: "It pleased God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, for the manifestation of the glory of His eternal power, wisdom, and goodness, in the beginning, to create, or make of nothing, the world, and all things therein whether visible or invisible, in the space of six days; and all very good" (Chap. IV, Sect. I).

The divines were careful to define creation in terms that exclude any notion of prolation or

emanation, as also any notion of eternal dualism. Creation consists in the bringing into existence of something that had no existence prior to the creative fiat of God. The phrase, "It pleased God," however, is inserted for the purpose of affirming that the creative act is not inherently necessary for God but rather the expression of His sovereign good pleasure. This principle rests upon God's own self-sufficiency. He is to Himself sufficient as He is of Himself existent. Creation is not necessary to His blessedness, it is not even necessary to fill up the quota of His perfect blessedness. Creation is rather the result of His will to *manifest* His own glory.

Generic Calvinism

The student of the Westminster Confession and Catechisms will often be amazed at the skill with which propositions dealing with matters of debate among Calvinists have been formulated. The divines were anxious that the formulation of any doctrine should be framed in such a way as to give liberty within the area of tolerated difference of judgment among those holding to the Reformed Faith in its integrity. One of the most interesting examples of this occurs in Chapter III, Section VI, of the Confession.

It is known that there were supralapsarians and infralapsarians in the Assembly. But the Confession does not pin its formulations to either of these peculiarities of persuasion among Calvinists. It might, indeed, appear that the section cited above has adopted an infralapsarian interpretation of the plan of salvation when it says, "Wherefore they who are elected, being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ." That is to say, it might appear that the elect were contemplated as "fallen in Adam" when they were elected to everlasting life. This, however, is a mistaken view of the import of this section.

It is interesting to know that there was considerable debate in the Assembly over this section. Words had been proposed which would have given, to say the least, a distinctly supralapsarian bias to the formulation. These words were finally rejected. It does not follow from this, however, that the form actually adopted is infralapsarian or that the divines intended it to be infralapsarian. The words cannot reasonably be construed as implying that the elect of mankind were contemplated by God as fallen when they were elected. The phrase, "being fallen in Adam," is a statement of temporal event just as the phrases that immediately follow, namely, "redeemed by Christ" and "effectually called," denote temporal events. The phrase, "being fallen in Adam" says nothing with respect to the order in which the decree with respect to the fall stood in reference to the decree of election. The purpose is rather to assign the reason why the decree of election necessitates (or, at least, issues in) redemption and the other steps of the saving process. It is be-

cause the elect are fallen in Adam that they need to be redeemed, called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept through faith unto salvation. In this statement of fact both supralapsarians and infralapsarians could happily concur. In words used by George Gillespie in the course of the debate, "every one may enjoy his own sense."

Conclusion

It is of prime importance that a Reformed creed should guard liberty of interpretation on those questions that are ostensibly matters of dispute among the most orthodox of Reformed thinkers. It is of even greater importance that a Reformed creed should be consistently biblical. The faith God has

given to His church cannot receive too accurate and consistent exhibition in the forms of confession and catechism so that they may serve as the symbols of wholehearted devotion to the Word of God, as the means of instruction and edification and as bulwarks against error. Both of these requirements have been admirably fulfilled by the Westminster standards. It is for these reasons that they have performed such signal service in the history of the Reformed church as the instruments of unity and the guardians of orthodoxy. To discard the heritage of the past is the mark of both ignorance and conceit. The way of humility before God and of gratitude to Him is to recognize that other men laboured and we have entered into their labours.

Things the Bible Does Not Teach About Labor

Martin Monsma

Minister Grandville Avenue Chr. Ref. Church
Grand Rapids, Mich.

IN MY contacts with believers in various localities I have found that there are many misconceptions regarding Christianity and Labor. In this address I would call your attention to some of these misconceptions. I have therefore written over my address, *Things the Bible does not Teach Regarding Labor*.

* * *

In the first place, THE BIBLE DOES NOT TEACH, that labor is a result of sin.

I need not dwell at length on this first point, since the error here lies almost on the surface. But there are some believers who seem to think that work is very definitely the result of sin. The Bible gives no support to this misconception, but teaches the very opposite. Note that man worked *before* he fell into sin, and not only after the fall. In Gen. 2:15 we read that God placed Adam in the Garden of Eden "to dress it and to keep it." In the state of perfection man therefore had to work. As God's caretaker and representative on earth it was Adam's privilege to work in Paradise.

Inasmuch as labor is not a result of sin the Bible designates it as one of the manifold works of God, and as a product of divine wisdom (Ps. 104:23, 24). Moreover, the Bible very definitely condemns laziness and unwarranted idleness. (Prov. 10:4; 21:25; 24:30-34; II Thess. 3:10-12.)

It should be remembered in this connection that productive labor is possible for man inasmuch as God created man in His own image. If man were a brute, and not a rational, moral creature, produc-

tive labor would be out of the question for man. Man can think God's thoughts after Him and produce because he is made after God Himself. Productive labor is therefore the fruit of man's creation after God's image, and is not the result of sin.

In full harmony with the foregoing we find that expert craftsmen such as Bezalel and Oholiab were excellent in plying their trade because they were filled with the Spirit of God. (Ex. 31:1-9.) If anyone would suggest that this special qualification by the Spirit of God came to these craftsmen by way of exception, and because they were to produce certain material for the tabernacle, then we would call attention to the fact the Bible elsewhere tells us that God instructs the farmer, teaching him how to prepare the soil for the seed. (Isaiah 28:26.)

No, labor is not the result of sin. It is clothed with a God given dignity and occupies a very honorable place in God's universe. Wearisome, burdensome work is indeed a result of sin (Gen. 3:17-19), but work as such is a blessing, and not a curse.

* * *

In the second place, note that THE BIBLE DOES NOT TEACH that social security legislation is wrong.

Under social security legislation we include laws providing for old age pension, unemployment insurance, sick relief, etc. Some Christians have condemned legislation of this kind, saying it is socialistic and unbiblical. With this position we need not agree. God Himself enacted legislation for Israel which aimed at Israel's social security. For the