Course Description
This course is the RTS introduction to theology and pastoral ministry from the standpoint of the seminary’s confessional, theological and pastoral commitments and convictions. The classroom lectures and interaction, and the reading assignments for this course will acquaint the student with important exegetical, theological, historical, and practical issues for Christian life and ministry. Students will see the integral connection between theology and pastoral ministry: that all theology is practical and that biblical pastoral ministry must flow out of and be founded upon sound biblical theology. Students will be equipped to apply Reformed Theology in all areas of pastoral labors, and to derive their theology of ministry from theological commitments.

Course Objectives
To familiarize students with the basics of Reformed Theology in historical context and encourage students to reflect on the basic hermeneutical and practical implications of Reformed Theology. The course will study the significance of a Reformed worldview for pastoral and theological studies. It will also set forth and commend the distinctives of Reformed Theological Seminary in order to enhance students’ ability to benefit from the rest of the curriculum.

Contact Information
Ligon Duncan, PhD – John E. Richards Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology, Chancellor of RTS  
RTS Orlando Office: Chancellor’s Office, Email: lduncan@rts.edu  
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5422 Clinton Boulevard  
Jackson, MS 39209  
Phone 601.923.1656  
Executive Assistant Jan Hyde: jhyde@rts.edu

Assisting me to facilitate this course will be my RTS Jackson TA: Jonathan Hunt  Email: jhunt2@rts.edu and also (in case Jonathan is otherwise occupied) John Rakshith Prabhakar  Email: jrprabhakar@rts.edu  
Assignments may be submitted to jhunt2@rts.edu electronically, and Jonathan and John Rakshith are both available to answer questions for you about logistical matters related to the course.

Academic Integrity
All work submitted must be the student’s own. Group study is encouraged, but work submitted must be the student’s own (and not group-produced). Plagiarism is specifically addressed in the Student Handbook. Students who do not fulfill assignments with requisite academic integrity will be referred to the Academic Dean (the student should also consult pp. 33-34 in the Handbook for further details).

Technology Use
In the interests of learning, students should take notes by hand in this course. Laptop computers may not be used. Phones and other handheld devices should remain in the off position and stowed.

Course Texts
*William Cunningham, An Introduction to Theological Studies (A Press, 1993)  
The Confession of Faith and Catechisms with Scripture Proofs (PCA; Great Commission Publications)  
*B. B. Warfield, The Plan of Salvation (Various Publishers)  

*Selected required texts will be made available electronically on the course website.
Course Assignments and Evaluation

Short Essays (30% of Final Grade)

Students will complete a total of five essays:

1) **Christian Experience:** Describe how you came to faith, and what God has done/is doing in your life.
2) **Sense of Inward Call:** Describe your sense of call to the ministry (if you have such). How has this been confirmed by others (pastors, campus ministers, local church, family, etc.)? What process of self-examination have you followed? Why are you pursuing seminary studies? Where/How do you feel drawn to serve in the future?
3) **Describe Reformed Theology:** Briefly and clearly articulate what it means to be “Reformed.” Express the essence of Reformed Theology as concisely and comprehensively as possible in this short scope.
4) **Commend Reformed Theology:** Write so as to convince an intelligent lay-person as to the truth of and importance of Reformed Theology.
5) **Personal Theology of Ministry:** Relate your personal theology to your goals, aims, and methods of how you will minister.

Format: Please follow this format. All papers will be two pages or less, single spaced, Times New Roman, 12-point Font, one-inch margins. Each paper should have a clear, logical order and structure. Please remember to proofread your work, as points will be deducted for careless misspellings and grammatical errors. In the header of each paper, please put your name as well as the paper number and title:

| Joseph Porter  
| #2 Sense of Inward Call |

I was born in a Christian home and attended an evangelical church growing up, but I don’t think I became a Christian until I was studying at the University of Florida. I went to a new

Reading (25% of Final Grade)

Students will turn in typed or neatly scripted handwritten answers to the study guide questions corresponding to the assigned reading materials (Calvin, Cunningham, Packer, Warfield and Witsius, as well as the Westminster Standards). See the Course Outline and Assignment Schedule to see when the reading and study guide questions are due.

Oral Exam on Total Content (45% of Final Grade)

Similar in nature to a presbytery exam, students will meet with the professor, either in person or via Skype, before and during Finals Week (as we are able to schedule it) and spend 30 minutes answering questions dealing with the fundamental issues of theology and ministry covered throughout this course. This exam will focus on your understanding of the lecture material and reading, and your ability to articulate it. I will tell the students exactly what to prepare for. Further details as to time and location will be announced as the end of the semester approaches.

Collection of Assignments

All assignments are due to be submitted electronically by **Saturday evenings at 6 o’clock (Eastern Time).** Assignments received after this time will be considered late and penalized accordingly. Assignments are not to be emailed to the TA, but rather physical copies should be submitted.

Late Work

Students should make every effort to turn in work on time or early. In the rare case of medical or other providential emergency, extensions and/or alternative arrangements may be granted. In most cases, late assignments will be accepted but penalized one letter grade per day. Please make these arrangements with the TA as soon as possible.
Attendance and Tardiness
Given the huge amount of material we have to cover and the relative scarcity of classroom hours, attendance will be at a premium and, of course, to the benefit of the student. My TA will take roll at every class. If you need to miss a class or to leave early or to arrive late, you should seek permission (via my TA, my EA, or myself). Failure to attend class, or to engage while in the class, will be noted. No unexplained absences.

Course Outline and Assignment Schedule
Listed below are the dates and topics and weekly assignment timetable/due dates for our course. Please factor these into your term calendar now!

Due Dates Summary
All assignments are due to be submitted electronically by Saturday evenings at 6 o’clock (Eastern Time). Assignments received after this time will be considered late and penalized accordingly. Assignments are not to be emailed to the TA, but rather physical copies should be submitted.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Assignment</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9/6</td>
<td>Essay 1 Christian Experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/13</td>
<td>Essay 2 Sense of Inward Call</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/20</td>
<td>Cunningham</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/27</td>
<td>Witsius</td>
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<td>10/4</td>
<td>Essay 3</td>
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<td>10/11</td>
<td>Warfield</td>
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<td>10/25</td>
<td>Essay 4</td>
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<td>11/1</td>
<td>Essay 5</td>
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<td>11/15</td>
<td>Packer</td>
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<td>11/29</td>
<td>Westminster Standards</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Sept. 5-6
Class 1
Reading completed before class: WCF 1-3; WLC 1-13; WSC 1-7
Essay 1 Due: Christian Experience

Sept. 12-13
Class 2
Reading completed before class: WCF 4-5; WLC 14-19; WSC 8-11
Essay 2 Due: Sense of Inward Call

Sept. 19-20
Class 3
Reading completed before class: Cunningham, Introduction to Theological Studies
Cunningham study guide questions due

Sept. 27
Reading completed by this date: Witsius, On the Character of a True Theologian
WCF 6-8; WLC 21-57; WSC 21-28
Witsius study guide questions due

Oct. 4
Read assigned portion of Calvin
Reading completed by this date: WCF 9-15; WLC 57-77, 149-153; WSC 29-32, 82-84
Essay 3 Due: Describe Reformed Theology

Oct. 11
Class 4
Reading completed before class: B. B. Warfield, Plan of Salvation
WCF 16-18; WLC 78-81
Warfield study guide questions due

Oct. 25
Read assigned portion of Calvin
Reading completed by this date: WCF 19-20; WLC 91-152, 149-153; WSC 39-84
Essay 4 Due: Commend Reformed Theology
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Assignment Description</th>
<th>Reading Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nov. 1</td>
<td>Read assigned portion of Calvin</td>
<td>Reading completed by this date: WCF 21-22; WLC 116-117, 178-196; WSC 98-107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td><strong>Essay 5 Due:</strong> Personal Theology of Ministry</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nov. 15</td>
<td>Read assigned portion of Calvin</td>
<td>J. I. Packer, <em>A Quest for Godliness</em></td>
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<td>WCF 23-26; WLC 61-66, 69, 82-83, 86, 90; WSC 36-38</td>
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<td><strong>Packer study guide questions due</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Nov. 22</td>
<td>Read assigned portion of Calvin</td>
<td>WCF 27; WLC 153-164; WSC 85, 88-93</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nov. 29</td>
<td><strong>Westminster Standards study guide questions due</strong></td>
<td>WCF 28-33; WLC 88-90,165-167; WSC 94-95</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dec. 1-?</td>
<td><strong>Take Oral Examination</strong></td>
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Study Guide Questions

William Cunningham, *An Introduction to Theological Studies*

1. What are Cunningham’s views on the use of original languages?
2. How does Cunningham define theology?
3. What is the “principal exercise” by which Christian theology is acquired?
4. According to Cunningham, how is the agency of the Holy Spirit drawn down upon us?
5. What are the three things that Cunningham argues (citing Luther) combine to “make” theologian?
6. What are Cunningham’s thoughts on temptation?
7. Of what use to ministers is the English (vernacular) Bible?
8. How is the theological student to use the Lord’s Day?

Herman Witsius, *On the Character of a True Theologian*

1. What was Witsius’ favorite maxim (a paraphrase is fine)?
2. What does Herman Witsius mean by “theologian”?
3. What are the three headings by which Witsius considers the theologian?
4. What does Witsius believe should be the relationship between the “natural school” to the “fields of scriptural study”?
5. What is Witsius’ opinion regarding the “commentaries of erudite men”?
6. To what does Witsius compare the “soul of a holy man”?
7. When is the theologian, according to Witsius, able to open the word of truth to the church?
8. What is the benefit of “unfeigned love” to teaching?
9. What type of man is the theologian, according to Witsius?
10. Does Witsius consider himself to be a “true theologian?”

B. B. Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation*

1. What is the technical designation of the “plan of salvation,” and what are some advantages to that term over the more popular designation “plan of salvation”?
2. How does Warfield articulate the way in which the Deist conceptualizes a “plan of God”?
3. What is Warfield’s purpose in his lecture (i.e. the book that you read for this class!)?
4. What is the distinction between the “Naturalistic” and the “Supernaturalistic” conception of the plan of salvation?
5. What are the two groups of “Supernaturalists”? Define them.
6. What is Warfield’s objection to evangelical Lutheranism and evangelical Arminianism that he considers in this work?
7. What are the two fundamental (and contradictory) doctrines of salvation?
8. What is the “essence of the sacerdotal scheme” regarding salvation, according to Warfield?
9. What are two of the three “aspects” of the sacerdotal system that Warfield lists that help us to understand the damage of sacerdotalism to “religious interests”?
10. What does Warfield mean by the term “Universalism”?
11. What are the four forms of Calvinism that Warfield articulates?
12. How is Calvinism related to assurance?
J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life*

1. How can the maturity of the Puritans help us toward the maturity that we need today? Give three reasons according to J. I. Packer.
2. On what “front” do modern evangelical Christians need the most help from the Puritans?
3. How did John Owen define *inspiration*, according to Packer?
4. What are three of the six principles that Packer lists regarding the Puritan approach to interpreting scripture?
5. To what was Richard Sibbes referring when he said that it was “either the greatest friend or the greatest enemy in the world”?
6. What is the purpose, according to Packer, of Owen’s work *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*?
7. How did the Puritans understand assurance?
8. What did the Puritans believe about “Gifts of the Spirit”?
9. What are three of the four “practical principles for keeping the Lord’s Day holy”?
10. Which American does Packer address as a “Puritan born out of due time”?

**The Westminster Standards**

*n.b. In responding to these questions, be sure to answer from the American version of the Standards, as adopted by the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church in America (the assigned version for this course).*

1. Describe the Westminster doctrine of Scripture. Especially discuss the concept of infallibility in relation to inerrancy.
2. How does Westminster view the relationship between the Eternal Decree/God’s Sovereignty and so-called “second causes”?
3. Summarize the Confession’s teaching on the Fall and Original Sin.
4. Explain Westminster’s teaching on justification.
5. Explain Westminster’s teaching on sanctification.
6. According to Westminster what is the role of “good works”?
9. What is a sacrament, according to Westminster?
10. Summarize the Confession’s teaching on marriage, divorce and remarriage.
## Course Objectives Related to MDiv Student Learning Outcomes
With Mini-Justification

**Course:** Introduction to Pastoral and Theological Studies  
**Professor:** The Rev. Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III  
**Campus:** Orlando  
**Date:** Fall 2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MDiv Student Learning Outcomes</th>
<th>Rubric</th>
<th>Mini-Justification</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Articulation (oral &amp; written)</strong></td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Students will respond to the material both in written papers and exams as well as in an oral exam.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Scripture</strong></td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>This course stresses the organization and teaching of the whole Scripture and the Scripture’s implication for ministry.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Reformed Theology</strong></td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Introduction to the contours of Reformed Theology.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sanctification</strong></td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Study of a Reformed Worldview and the godliness required of God’s ministers.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Desire for Worldview</strong></td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Stresses the content of the worldview founded on the Scripture.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Winsomely Reformed/Evangelistic</strong></td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Focuses on the beauty of the Scripture’s teaching and the desire to bring people to a saving knowledge of God.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Preach</strong></td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>Gives a foundation for interpretation, exegesis, and application in preaching.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Worship</strong></td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Stresses God as the author and object of worship.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Shepherd</strong></td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>The forming of “servant-leaders” and “pastor-shepherds” is the goal.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Church/World</strong></td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Comparison of the Biblical, Reformed Theology with other systems.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
1.1 Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same 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.

Modern Translation
1.1 Although the light of nature and the works of creation and providence manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, to such an extent that men are without excuse, yet they are not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and of his will which is necessary for salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord, at various times and in diverse ways, to reveal himself and to declare his will to his church; and afterward—for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh and the malice of Satan and of the world—to commit this revelation wholly to writing. Therefore the Holy Scripture is most necessary, God's former ways of revealing his will to his people having ceased. (OPC, Modern English Study Version [MESV]).

WCF 1.1’s Doctrinal Assertions Stated in Sentence Form – The Necessity of the Bible
1. God has revealed himself universally in and through nature.
2. He does this especially in his works of creation and providence.
4. This knowledge of God is so clear and so universal as to leave all mankind inexcusable.
5. This knowledge of God is, however, insufficient for the salvation of sinners.
6. It is insufficient not because of its defect but because of ours. **Explanation:** this knowledge of God, since the Fall of man, does not and cannot lead to a saving knowledge of God, not because of its lack of clarity, comprehensiveness, or persuasiveness, but rather because of our sinfulness and blindness.
7. Therefore, God chose, in various times and various ways, to reveal himself specially to his people.
8. God declared his will to his church through his Word, through theophanies, prophets and apostles.
9. God committed his special revelation into writing, in order to better preserve and propagate the truth, and to better establish and strengthen the church against the corrupting influence of the world, flesh and Devil.
10. This is why the Bible is absolutely necessary: because God no longer reveals his will to his people the way he did prior to the completion of the canon of Scripture.
11. **Bottom line:** The Bible is necessary for a saving knowledge of God and for sound discipleship.

**Romans 1:18-23**

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. 19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 20 For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. 21 For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools, 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.
Chapter 1 - Of the Holy Scripture

(1.2 There is a fixed biblical Canon of sixty-six books)

1.2 Under the name of holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all the books of the Old and New Testaments, which are these:

Of the Old Testament:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old Testament Books</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Genesis</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Chronicles</td>
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<td>Daniel</td>
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<td>Exodus</td>
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<td>Ezra</td>
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<td>Hosea</td>
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<td>Leviticus</td>
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<td>Nehemiah</td>
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<td>Joel</td>
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<td>Numbers</td>
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<td>Esther</td>
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<td>Amos</td>
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<td>Deuteronomy</td>
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<td>Job</td>
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<td>Obadiah</td>
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<td>Joshua</td>
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<td>Psalms</td>
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<td>Jonah</td>
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<td>Judges</td>
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<td>Proverbs</td>
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<td>Micah</td>
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<td>Ruth</td>
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<td>Ecclesiastes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nahum</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 Samuel</td>
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<tr>
<td>Song of Songs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Habakkuk</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Samuel</td>
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<tr>
<td>Isaiah</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zephaniah</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 Kings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jeremiah</td>
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<tr>
<td>Haggai</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Kings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lamentations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zechariah</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 Chronicles</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ezekiel</td>
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<td>Malachi</td>
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Of the New Testament:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>New Testament Books</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
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<td>Ephesians</td>
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<td>Hebrews</td>
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<td>Mark</td>
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<td>Philippians</td>
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<td>James</td>
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<td>Luke</td>
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<td>Colossians</td>
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<td>John</td>
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<td>Romans</td>
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<td>Titus</td>
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<td>Jude</td>
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<td>Galatians</td>
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<td>Philemon</td>
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<td>Revelation</td>
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All which are given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life.

Commentary:
This section, in addition to listing the acknowledged books of the Bible, the Canon of Scripture, explains that the Bible is: (1) the written Word of God, (2) divinely inspired and (3) the rule of faith and life. The word canon means rule or standard. So, when we refer to the “canon of Scripture” we are talking about the list of books that are the rule of Christian teaching (Ward).

It will be helpful to be familiar with the terms “revelation,” “inspiration” and “canon” as you study this section. Revelation refers to God’s self-disclosure, that is, God’s making Himself known to us. He reveals Himself to us, and the content of that self-disclosure we call “revelation.” Inspiration refers to a specific mode of God’s self-revelation in writing. All of Scripture is “God-breathed” (which is the precise meaning of “inspired.” Thus, the words of Scripture are God’s own words. Canon means the collection of books and documents exclusively containing the permanent authoritative written record of divine revelation.
Chapter 1 - Of the Holy Scripture

1.3 The books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, are no part of the canon of the Scripture, and therefore are of no authority in the church of God, nor to be any otherwise approved, or made use of, than other human writings.

Modern Translation

1.3 The books commonly called the Apocrypha, because they are not divinely inspired, are not part of the canon of Scripture, and therefore are of no authority in the church of God and are not to be approved, or made use of, in any manner different from other human writings. (OPC, MESV).

Rowland Ward’s Translation

1.3 The books commonly called ‘Apocrypha’ are not divinely inspired and so are not part of the canon of the Scripture. Therefore they do not have authority in the church of God, and are only to be regarded and used in the same way as other merely human writings.

Commentary:

“The apocryphal (= hidden) books were written in Greek and composed during the period between Malachi (c.400 BC) and the New Testament, and mainly in the 200 years before Jesus’ birth. The Apocrypha bears plain marks that it cannot have God as its author, since nothing can be a rule for faith which contradicts existing revelation, or in other ways lacks the marks of inspiration such as truthfulness. Indeed, one of the best of the apocryphal books (1 Maccabees c.110 BC) admits that there was no true prophet in Israel at the time (9:27;14:41), while 2 Maccabees 15:38 reads in a way no prophet wrote: ‘If it [my book] is found well written and aptly composed, that is what I myself hoped for; if cheap and mediocre, I could only do my best’ (cf. 2:23-27). The preface to Ecclesiasticus (Ben Sirach) shows the author was simply trying to help people understand the Old Testament. Other aspects of the content are inconsistent with Divine authorship.

“The Jews did not accept the Apocrypha as canon for faith, but the Christian church used the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint, dating from c.200 BC). Some copies of this translation included the Apocrypha. Hence there grew up in the Christian Church a canon of faith (our Bible) and a canon of books read for edification, but not used to establish any doctrine (the Apocrypha).

“The influence of Augustine in the 4th century in approving the apocryphal books ultimately overcame the influence of those who rejected them, such as his contemporary Jerome. In 1546 the Roman Catholic Council of Trent included most (not all) the apocryphal books as part of the canon of faith. Early Protestants maintained the earlier position, distinguishing a canon of faith and a canon of edifying books not to be used to establish doctrine, hence even the first edition of the King James Bible (1611) included the apocryphal books. The Westminster Confession’s statement reflects the clarity and consistency attained through the debate with Rome.”

“Anyone who compares the apocryphal writings with the New Testament writings will be convinced that the latter are superior in every way. (Rowland Ward, The Westminster Confession of Faith: A Study Guide, New Melbourne Press).

What are the books of the Apocrypha? Depends on who you ask! Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox: Baruch & Letter of Jeremiah ● Additions to Daniel (Susanna, Song of the Three Children, Bel & the Dragon) ● Additions to Esther ● Judith ● 1 Maccabees ● 2 Maccabees ● Sirach ● Tobit ● Wisdom ● Eastern Orthodox only: Prayer of Manasseh ● 1 Esdras ● 2 Esdras ● 3 Maccabees ● 4 Maccabees ● Odes ● Psalm 151.
(1.4 The Bible is authoritative because it is God's Word)

1.4 The authority of the holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or
church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.

Modern Translation

1.4 The authority of the Holy Scripture, because of which it ought to be believed and obeyed, does not depend upon the testimony of any man
or church, but entirely upon God, its author (who is truth itself); therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God. (OPC,
MESV).

Rowland Ward’s Translation

1.4 The authority of the Holy Scripture does not depend on human testimony or a church’s witness but entirely on God its author, who is truth
itself. Therefore Holy Scripture is to be received, believed and obeyed because it is the word of God.

Commentary:

This section of the Confession articulates the basis of the authority of Scripture. It tells us why the Bible is authoritative; why it should be
“believed and obeyed.” The answer is simple. It is authoritative because of the Author! The final authority of Scripture rests upon the final
authority of the Author. Because God is authoritative, His Word is authoritative. You know the bumper sticker: “God said it. I believe it. That
settles it!” Well, it gets this point, . . . almost. It ought to read: “God said it. That settles it. So I believe it.”

Historical Background:

At the time of the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church taught that the word of God, both written and unwritten, was “deposited” into the
care of the [Roman] church, and that, thus, the chief reason we are to accept Scripture as divine is because of the testimony of the church. This
view persists to this day. Roman Catholic author John O’Brien (in The Faith of Millions, 1962, p. 174) puts it this way: “The declaration of
the Catholic Church that the books of the New Testament are all inspired by God constitutes the sole authority for the universal belief of both
Catholics and Protestants in their inspired character.” So, this section of the Confession is responding to and challenging this assertion.

B.B. Warfield, the great Presbyterian theologian who taught at Princeton in the late nineteenth and early twentieth, says: “Just
because the book is God’s Book, revealing to us His will, it is authoritative in and of itself; and it ought to be believed and obeyed; not on the
ground of any borrowed authority, lent it from any human source, but on the single and sufficient ground of its own divine origin and
character, “because it is the Word of God,” and “God (who is truth itself)” is “the author thereof” (§4). So the Confession asserts, in unison with
the whole body of Protestant theology, not as if it held that Scripture is to be believed and obeyed as God’s Word before we know it to be such,
but as basing its right to be believed and obeyed on its divine origin and character already established by definition in the preceding sections.
Because inspired, Scripture is the Word of God; and because the Word of God, it exercises lawful authority over the thought and acts of men.”

A.A. Hodge says: This proposition is designed to deny . . . that the written Scripture and ecclesiastical tradition alike depend upon the
authoritative seal of the Church for their credibility. They thus make the Scriptures a product of the Spirit through the Church; while, in fact, the
Church is a product of the Spirit through the instrumentality of the Word. It is true that the testimony of the early Church to the apostolic
authorship of the several books is of fundamental importance,” but the authority of the Scriptures is not thereby proven to be derived from the
Church. The Word precedes and creates the Church.
Chapter 1 - Of the Holy Scripture

(1.5 The Holy Spirit persuades and assures us that the Bible is true)

1.5 We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the church to a high and reverent esteem of the holy Scripture. And the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man’s salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God: yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.

Rowland Ward’s Translation

1.5 We may be brought by the witness of the church to have the highest respect for Holy Scripture. The heavenly character of its content, the powerful effects of its teaching, the majesty of its style, the agreement of all its parts, the fact that throughout it gives all glory to God, the full disclosure it gives of the only way of salvation, its many other incomparable excellencies, and its entire perfection: all these supply abundant evidence that Scripture is the word of God. Nevertheless, our full persuasion and assurance of its infallible truth and divine authority results from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts.

Why do we believe the Bible to be the Word of God and true?

Short answer: Because of its Author, its contents, it claims and the Spirit’s witness. Reflect.

Commentary:

“If we ask, ‘How can sinful people be brought to full conviction of and practical obedience to the infallible truth and divine authority of Scripture?’ the answer is that faith in Scripture as God-breathed is not irrational; many reasons for faith can be offered since the qualities of Scripture are consistent with its divine authorship. Still, such arguments - and we could add archaeology to those listed in the Confession - cannot give us saving knowledge and true assurance. Faith is not bare intellectual assent but a spiritual grace (see WCF 14:1) which God gives by the working of his Holy Spirit. Yet the Spirit does not act independently of the word of God, but by and with it (contra the ‘inner light’ teaching of the Society of Friends in the 17th century or some ‘charismatics’ today). So a saving understanding does not contradict a rational understanding. Note that the necessity of the Spirit’s work does not mean believers are inspired; rather, they are illuminated by the Spirit to receive the testimony of Holy Scripture in a saving way. Not all believers are equally illumined nor do they all have equal knowledge, hence the Holy Spirit’s testimony does not eliminate all disagreement on some matters of lesser importance revealed in Scripture (cf. WCF 14:2.3). The role of the church is not to place herself above the word of God on which, indeed, she is founded (Eph 2:20), but to be the servant of Christ. She should guard Scripture, draw attention to its qualities, make plain its meaning, and submit to its authority as the word of Christ.” (Rowland Ward, The Westminster Confession of Faith: A Study Guide, New Melbourne Press).

“But even if anyone clears God’s Sacred Word from man’s evil speaking, he will not at once imprint upon their hearts that certainty which piety requires...For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men’s hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. The same Spirit, therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what has been divinely commanded.” (John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1.7.4 (Battles’ trans.)
Rowland Ward’s Translation

1.6 The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, and for our salvation, faith and life, is either expressly stated in Scripture, or by good and necessary reasoning may be deduced from Scripture. Nothing, whether new revelations of the Spirit or human traditions, is ever to be added to Scripture. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of the things that are revealed in the word. We also acknowledge that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God and the government of the church, circumstances common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by natural intelligence and Christian prudence, but always in line with the general rules of God’s word.

Commentary:

This section of the Confession asserts the sufficiency of Scripture. The sufficiency of Scripture means that the Bible is fully and completely adequate for the equipping of the saints for the living of the Christian life. As Paul says: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16-17, ESV). This section of the Confession is polemically positioned over against the claims of Rome that for true piety, the Church may require things not warranted by Scripture, and over against charismatics/pentecostals, who may be looking for extraordinary revelations as a necessary or normal part of the Christian life and guidance. Yet, the Confession emphasizes that we all stand in need of illumination. Illumination is the application of God’s word to our lives, by the Holy Spirit, so that we grasp it as truth for ourselves and in some measure begin to live it out, by grace, for God’s glory.

Structure

Have you noticed the structure of WCF 1.1-6?

1.1 The Necessity of the Bible: Why we need the Scripture
1.2 The Contents of the Bible (positively stated): What we recognize as the Canon of Scripture
1.3 The Contents of the Bible (negatively stated): Why we don’t accept the “Apocrypha” as Scripture
1.4 The Authority of the Bible: Why we believe the Scripture is authoritative
1.5 The Authenticity of the Bible: Why we believe Scripture is true
1.6 The Sufficiency of the Bible: Why we believe that Scripture is the only rule of faith and life

Quote: “The sufficiency of Scripture means that we don’t need any more special revelation. We don’t need any more inspired, inerrant words. In the Bible God has given us, we have the perfect standard for judging all other knowledge. All other knowledge stands under the judgment of the Bible even when it serves the Bible.” (John Piper)
Chapter 1 - Of the Holy Scripture

1.7 The Bible is clear and understandable when it comes to the way of life

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

Rowland Ward’s Translation

All things in Scripture are not equally plain in themselves, nor equally clear to all. However, those things that are necessary to know, believe and observe for salvation, are so clearly stated and explained in one place of Scripture or another, that the uneducated person as well as the scholar can sufficiently understand them by appropriate use of the ordinary means.

Commentary:

This section of the Confession asserts the clarity or perspicuity of Scripture. The Bible is clear, and thus understandable. God is a good communicator. You don’t have to be a rocket scientist to understand the main thrust of Scripture. The historic backdrop to this section is again the debate with Rome. Rowland Ward says: “The Roman Church not only claims that sacred tradition plus Holy Scripture makes up the word of God which is entrusted to the church, but asserts, in the language of the Second Vatican Council: ‘But the task of giving an authentic interpretation of the word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone...It is for the bishops...suitably to instruct the faithful...in the correct use of the divine books...by giving them translations of the sacred texts which are equipped with necessary and really adequate explanations’ (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, 1965; cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1994 #85).

The true Protestant teaching is that, while not all parts of Scripture are equally clear, the Scripture can be given to those who are not scholars as well as those who are, and that the central truths are clear enough for any who apply ordinary methods. ‘The main things are the plain things.’ Of course some will abuse and twist Scripture (note 2 Peter 3:16), but short of applying physical coercion, this is inevitable, even on Rome’s theory. It is, of course, notorious that members of the Church of Rome are not generally familiar with Bible content, while true Protestants promote the use of the Bible at every opportunity.” (Ward)

A.A. Hodge comments: “Protestants admit that many of the truths revealed in the Scriptures in their own nature transcend human understanding, and that many prophecies remain intentionally obscure until explained by their fulfillment in the developments of history. Nevertheless, Protestants affirm, and Romanists deny—(1) That every essential article of faith and rule of practice may be clearly learned from Scripture; and (2) That private and unlearned Christians may be safely allowed to interpret Scripture for themselves.”

Hodge then makes five arguments for the Protestant view, summarized here—(1) The Bible itself repeatedly commands all believers to search the Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:15–17; Acts 17:11; John 5:39). (2) The Scriptures are addressed either to all men or to all believers (Deut. 6:4–9; Luke 1:3; Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; and the salutations of all the Epistles except those to Timothy and Titus). (3) The Bible affirms itself to be perspicuous (Ps. 119:105,130; 2 Cor. 3:14; 2 Pet. 1:18,19; 2 Tim. 3:15–17). (4) The Bible claims to be our guide to salvation (2 Tim 3:15) and life (Ps. 119:105). If it is not clear then it fails those purposes. (5) Experience proves the clarity of the Bible. Those churches that have most faithfully disseminated the Scriptures in the vernacular and taught their people the Word of God, have conformed more faithfully to the plain and certain sense of the Bible’s teaching in faith and practice.
(1.8 The Bible has been providentially preserved authentically in the original languages, but should be translated into the common language of the people of God)

1.8 The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which, at the time it was written, was most generally known among the nations), are immediately inspired by God. By his special care and providence, God has preserved them in purity ever since, so that they are authoritative, and in all religious controversies are the church’s final court of appeal. All the people of God have a right to and interest in the Scriptures, and are commanded to read and search them in the fear of God. But as the Hebrew and Greek are not known to all God’s people, the Scriptures are to be translated into the common language of every nation to which they are brought. In this way the word of God may be abundant in the life of each believer, who may worship God in an acceptable manner and, through endurance in faith and the comfort of the Scriptures, have hope.

Rowland Ward’s Translation

1.8 The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which, at the time it was written, was the language most generally known among the nations), are immediately inspired by God. By his special care and providence, God has preserved them in purity ever since, so that they are authoritative, and in all religious controversies are the church’s final court of appeal. All the people of God have a right to and interest in the Scriptures, and are commanded to read and search them in the fear of God. But as the Hebrew and Greek are not known to all God’s people, the Scriptures are to be translated into the common language of every nation to which they are brought. In this way the word of God may be abundant in the life of each believer, who may worship God in an acceptable manner and, through endurance in faith and the comfort of the Scriptures, have hope.

Commentary:

Ward says: “Notice that the Scriptures are said to be immediately inspired by God - this points to the autographs as the very word of God. They were given in the common language of those who first received them. [Daniel 2:4b-7:28 is in Aramaic, the language of the nations at that time.] Concerning the transmission of these Scriptures to us, a special providential care . . . is asserted, and this has resulted in the Scriptures being ‘kept pure in all ages’ so that full authority is retained.

Until 1947 the oldest Hebrew text we had was dated around AD 850, but since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls we have manuscripts of almost all the Old Testament books dating from around 100 BC. For all ordinary purposes these manuscripts are the same as those underlying our common Bibles. For the New Testament, we have over 5,000 manuscripts, most of only a part. There are over 150,000 variations representing 10,000 places but most fall into the category of spelling mistakes and other trivia, and so are not really variant readings at all. For the past 150 years critical scholars, often not Christian believers, have pored over the text. It is admitted on all sides that 98% of the New Testament text is beyond dispute and the 2% where there is any real question has no effect on the certainty of any Christian doctrine, regardless of which reading is preferred.

The stress on the duty of making translations in the ‘vulgar’ or common language reflects the Protestant conviction that a personal, vital and constant contact with the word of God is characteristic of true piety. . . . Thus the translators of the King James Version of 1611 aimed to be understood by the ‘very vulgar’, according to their lengthy Preface (found in library editions). Similarly, Luther’s was not the first Bible in German, but it was the first in a German that could be appreciated readily by ordinary Germans. It is desirable that the translation work be done by believing scholars, who are sensitive to Biblical theology, but orthodox faith does not automatically supply deficiencies in scholarship.”
Chapter 1 - Of the Holy Scripture

(1.9 Scripture interprets Scripture)

1.9 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.

Rowland Ward’s Translation

1.9 It is an infallible rule that Scripture is to be interpreted by Scripture. Scripture does not have several different meanings but one true and genuine meaning (which may embrace several different applications) arising from the words properly understood in context. Where there is any dispute, the meaning must be decided in the light of other passages that speak more clearly.

Commentary:

Ward says: “The Roman Church adheres to the idea of a multiple meaning in Scripture. Along with the surface meaning of the words were various higher levels of interpretation. The letter taught merely the deed, the allegory of the passage what one was to believe, the moral meaning what one should do, and the anagogue what you should strive for. Consequently, without the expert guidance of the church and the pope one would be in doubt and lost in ambiguities. This remains Rome’s teaching (Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994) 115-119). But Scripture does not have a nose of wax to be shaped as we please. God is its primary author and Scripture is consistent with itself as a result. The Reformers rightly rejected the multiple meaning concept. They asserted that the meaning evidenced by the words themselves (which might include figures of speech), in both their immediate and wider context was the true meaning.”

J.I. Packer explains: “All Christians have a right and duty not only to learn from the church’s heritage of faith but also to interpret Scripture for themselves. The church of Rome doubts this, alleging that individuals easily misinterpret the Scriptures. This is true; but the following rules, faithfully observed, will help prevent that from happening. Every book of Scripture is a human composition, and though it should always be revered as the Word of God, interpretation of it must start from its human character. Allegorizing, therefore, which disregards the human writer’s expressed meaning is never appropriate. Each book was written not in code but in a way that could be understood by the readership to which it was addressed. This is true even of the books that primarily use symbolism: Daniel, Zechariah, and Revelation. The main thrust is always clear, even if details are clouded. So when we understand the words used, the historical background, and the cultural conventions of the writer and his readers, we are well on the way to grasping the thoughts that are being conveyed. Spiritual understanding—that is, the discernment of the reality of God, his ways with humankind, his present will, and one’s own relationship to him now and for the future—will not however reach us from the text until the veil is removed from our hearts and we are able to share the writer’s own passion to know and please and honor God (2 Cor. 3:16; 1 Cor. 2:14). Prayer that God’s Spirit may generate this passion in us and show us God in the text is needed here. (See Ps. 119:18-19, 26-27, 33-34, 73, 125, 144, 169; Eph. 1:17-19; 3:16-19.) . . . It is certain that Scripture nowhere contradicts Scripture; rather, one passage explains another. This sound principle of interpreting Scripture by Scripture is sometimes called the analogy of Scripture or the analogy of faith. Each book exhibits unchanging truth about God, humanity, godliness, and ungodliness, applied to and illustrated by particular situations in which individuals and groups found themselves. . . . No meaning may be read into or imposed on Scripture that cannot with certainty be read out of Scripture—shown, that is, to be unambiguously expressed by one or more of the human writers. Careful and prayerful observance of these rules is a mark of every Christian who “correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15).”

(Packer. Concise Theology)
Chapter 1 - Of the Holy Scripture

(1.10 The Bible, God speaking in Scripture, is the supreme authority in all matters of belief)

1.10 The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.

Rowland Ward’s Translation

1.10 The Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture is the supreme judge by whom all religious controversies are to be decided, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, human teachings, and claims to spiritual guidance are to be examined; with his decision we are to be content.

Commentary:

Ward says: "The expression 'the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture' aims to express the conviction that when Scripture speaks it is really the Holy Spirit speaking. The Bible is no bare word but living and active in the Spirit's hands. He illumines our minds to understand the true meaning of Scripture. The Holy Scriptures which were the infallible dictates of the Spirit in the apostles, are more perfect than any of our apprehensions which come by the same Spirit...Therefore we must not try the Scriptures by our most spiritual apprehensions but our apprehensions by the Scriptures...This trying the Spirit by the Scriptures is not a setting of the Scriptures above the Spirit...but is only a trying of the Spirit by the Spirit: that is the Spirit's operations in ourselves...by the Spirit's operations in the apostles, and by their revelations recorded for our use. For they and not we are called foundations of the church' [Richard Baxter, A Christian Directory (1673), Q. 163]. In effect the Confession asserts that over against the Papal tribunal is another tribunal from which the Spirit speaks and infallibly guides. The true sense of scripture is to be discovered from the Scripture itself as the Spirit brings conviction of the truth to our hearts.”

J.I. Packer explains: “The Christian principle of biblical authority means, on the one hand, that God purposes to direct the belief and behavior of his people through the revealed truth set forth in Holy Scripture; on the other hand it means that all our ideas about God should be measured, tested, and where necessary corrected and enlarged, by reference to biblical teaching. Authority as such is the right, claim, fitness, and by extension power, to control. Authority in Christianity belongs to God the Creator, who made us to know, love, and serve him, and his way of exercising his authority over us is by means of the truth and wisdom of his written Word. As from the human standpoint each biblical book was written to induce more consistent and wholehearted service of God, so from the divine standpoint the entire Bible has this purpose. And since the Father has now given the Son executive authority to rule the cosmos on his behalf (Matt. 28:18), Scripture now functions precisely as the instrument of Christ's lordship over his followers. All Scripture is like Christ's letters to the seven churches (Rev. 2–3) in this regard. ¶ Where is God's authoritative truth to be found today? Three answers are given, and each appeals to the Bible in its own way. (1) The Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches find God's truth, as they believe, in the interpretations of Scripture that are embodied in their own tradition and consensus. They view the Bible as God-given truth, but they insist that the church must interpret it and is infallible when it does so. (2) By contrast, individuals labeled liberal, radical, modernist, or subjectivist find God's truth in the thoughts, impressions, judgments, theories and speculations that Scripture triggers in their own minds. While dismissing the New Testament concept of the inspiration of Scripture, and not treating their Bible as totally trustworthy or as embodying absolute and authoritative transcripts of the mind of God, they are confident that the Spirit leads them to pick and choose in such a way that wisdom from God results. (3) Historic Protestantism, however, finds God's truth in the teaching of the canonical Scriptures as such. It receives these Scriptures as inspired (God-breathed), inerrant (totally true in all they affirm), sufficient (telling us all that we need to know for salvation and eternal life), and clear (straightforward and self-interpreting on all matters of importance).
Chapter 2 - Of God and of the Trinity

(2.1 There is only one God, who is Spirit, absolute in perfection, does all things for his own glory)

2.1 There is but one only, living, and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions; immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute; working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will, for his own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek him; and withal, most just, and terrible in his judgments, hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty.

Modern Translation
2.1 There is only one living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection. He is a most pure spirit, invisible, with neither body, parts, nor passive properties. He is unchangeable, boundless, eternal, and incomprehensible. He is almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, and most absolute. He works all things according to the purpose of his own unchangeable and completely righteous will for his own glory. He is completely loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, and he is the rewarder of those who diligently seek him. He is also completely just and terrifying in his judgments, hating all sin, and will by no means acquit the guilty. (OPC, Modern English Study Version [MESV]).

Rowland Ward’s Translation
2.1 There is but one, and only one, living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a completely pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or other limitations of creatureliness. He is unchangeable, immensely great, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, completely wise, completely holy, completely free, and completely absolute. He works all things according to the purpose of his own unchangeable and completely righteous will for his own glory. He is completely loving, gracious, merciful, and long-suffering, abounding in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin. He is the rewarder of those who diligently seek him. Moreover, he is completely just and awesome in his judgments, hating all sin, and he will by no means leave the guilty unpunished.

Commentary:
The existence of God is not treated speculatively in the Bible, and nor is it in the Confession. In thinking of God we are immediately reminded of God’s claims upon us. The description of God as ‘living and true’, ‘infinite in being and perfection, a completely pure spirit’ is elaborated in the words ‘without body, parts or passions.’ Everything that belongs to God is essential to God - he cannot lose a ‘part’ of himself and still be God; and he is free of all attitudes (‘passions’) that reflect instability or lack of control. The immensity or vastness of God refers to his omnipresence by which, to use Scripture phrases, ‘he fills heaven and earth,’ and yet ‘the heavens of heavens cannot contain him.’ God is incomprehensible in the sense that he alone knows himself perfectly, and creatures can only know him as he wills. The language used of God in this section is generally Biblical in form and does not follow a rigid progression or classification. (Ward)

Some thing we learn about God here:
1. There is only one living and true God.
2. God is a pure personal Spirit, without bodily parts or limitations.
3. God possesses all absolute perfections in and of himself.
4. God does all things, righteously, for his own glory.
5. God is maximally loving, gracious, merciful, patient, good, true, faithful, forgiving, generous and just.
6. God hates evil, and is awesome and indefatigable in his pursuit of the just punishment of the guilty.
Chapter 2 - Of God and of the Trinity

(2.2 God is self-sufficient, self-existent, totally independent and sovereign)

2.2 God hath all life, glory, goodness, blessedness, in and of himself; and is alone in and unto himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures which he hath made, nor deriving any glory from them, but only manifesting his own glory in, by, unto, and upon them. He is the alone fountain of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom are all things; and hath most sovereign dominion over them, to do by them, for them, or upon them whatsoever himself pleaseth. In his sight all things are open and manifest, his knowledge is infinite, infallible, and independent upon the creature, so as nothing is to him contingent, or uncertain. He is most holy in all his counsels, in all his works, and in all his commands. To him is due from angels and men, and every other creature, whatsoever worship, service, or obedience he is pleased to require of them.

Rowland Ward’s Translation

2.2 God has all life, glory, goodness, and blessedness, in and of himself. He alone is all-sufficient in and to himself, nor does he need any of the creatures that he has made, nor are they the source of any of his glory. Rather, he reveals his own glory in, by, to and on them, for he is the only source of all being, of whom, through whom and to whom are all things. He has completely sovereign dominion over them to do by, to or for them whatever he pleases. In his sight all things are open and evident. His knowledge is infinite and infallible, and does not depend upon any created thing, so that to him nothing is conditional or uncertain. He is completely holy in all his purposes, in all his works, and in all his commands. To him is due whatever worship, service or obedience he is pleased to require from angels, human beings and all other creatures.

Commentary:

“The first part of this section asserts the absolute self-existence of God. When it is said in the original text that God does not derive any glory from his creatures, it means that nothing that contributes to God’s glory has its original source in man. Whatever in us contributes to God’s glory, or the display of it, is ultimately from God himself.

The truths about God in WCF 2 provide the basis for the teaching on the divine decrees in WCF 3. Sovereignty must not be understood as tyranny or arbitrary rule, but the holy rule of the holy God. God’s knowledge extends to the springs of man’s thought and action, yet it is not mere foresight but is independent of the creature so as to be free of all uncertainty. Consequently, God alone is worthy of all worship and all praise.” (Ward)

J.I. Packer helpfully says: “Children sometimes ask, “Who made God?” The clearest answer is that God never needed to be made, because he was always there. He exists in a different way from us: we, his creatures, exist in a dependent, derived, finite, fragile way, but our Maker exists in an eternal, self-sustaining, necessary way—necessary, that is, in the sense that God does not have it in him to go out of existence, just as we do not have it in us to live forever. We necessarily age and die, because it is our present nature to do that; God necessarily continues forever unchanged, because it is his eternal nature to do that. This is one of many contrasts between creature and Creator.

God’s self-existence is a basic truth. At the outset of his presentation of the unknown God to the Athenian idolaters, Paul explained that this God, the world’s Creator, “is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else” (Acts 17:23-25). Sacrifices offered to idols, in today’s tribal religions as in ancient Athens, are thought of as somehow keeping the god going, but the Creator needs no such support system. The word aseity, meaning that he has life in himself and draws his unending energy from himself (a se in Latin means “from himself”), was coined by theologians to express this truth, which the Bible makes clear (Pss. 90:1-4; 102:25-27; Isa. 40:28-31; John 5:26; Rev. 4:10).

In theology, endless mistakes result from supposing that the conditions, bounds, and limits of our own finite existence apply to God. The doctrine of his aseity stands as a bulwark against such mistakes. In our life of faith, we easily impoverish ourselves by embracing an idea of God that is too limited and small, and again the doctrine of God’s aseity stands as a bulwark to stop this happening. It is vital for spiritual health to believe that God is great (cf. Ps. 95:1-7), and grasping the truth of his aseity is the first step on the road to doing this. (Concise Theology)
Chapter 2 - Of God and of the Trinity

(2.3 God is One and Triune, and Father, Son and Holy Spirit are distinct and divine)

2.3 In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost: the Father is of none, neither begotten, nor proceeding: the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son.

Rowland Ward’s Translation

2.3 In the unity of the Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The order seen in the external operations of the three persons reflects the eternal reality that each person possesses a property distinct from the others: the Father eternally possesses fatherhood in relation to the Son, the Son is eternally the son of the Father and the Spirit is eternally from the Father and the Son.

Commentary:

The word “trinity” is not found in Scripture, but the doctrine is. The biblical truth of the trinity rests simply on the data of Scripture and is the result of Christian reflection upon the way God has shown himself to be present and active in the world in his mighty acts of salvation. The doctrine is not a simple one, but then God is not simple either. We must accept the information given in Scripture and resist the temptation to ignore or twist any part to make the conclusions easier to our minds.

The English term trinity comes from the Latin word “trinitas.” Tertullian (AD c160-c220) contributed the term ‘trinitas’ to the doctrine of God as it was formulated in the 4th century. He used this term in his writings against Praxeas (AD c215), who had taught that it was the Father who suffered on the cross. But neither Tertullian nor the Councils of the 4th century supposed that they were doing other than setting out and clearing of misrepresentations the teaching about God found in the pages of Holy Scripture.

Well then, how do we state the doctrine? The Shorter Catechism reminds us: ‘There are three persons in the Godhead, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory.’ Such a statement is seeking to do full justice to the data of Scripture and may be otherwise expressed in three propositions: (i) there is only one God; (ii) the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is each God; and (iii) the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is each a distinct person.

We speak of three persons not because this language is adequate but because the Bible describes the relations of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in ways analogous to relations among human persons. God is one in being or essence but within the singleness of his being there are three personal distinctions. Put plainly, we may say that God’s life is not a solitary, lonely one, but has a richness and fulness reflecting the fact that God is a fellowship. Now to say God is a fellowship is not to say he is a committee, for a committee implies various individuals each with their distinctive origin, and might easily lead us to tritheism, belief in three Gods. To say God is a fellowship is to say that there is an intimacy of loving relationship, and reciprocity in the nature of God.

The last sentence in the 1646 text reflects discussions in the Christian church of the early centuries as believers reflected on the information in Scripture. In essence the church was saying that God is eternally what his revelation in history shows him to be. The Bible shows the Father to be the one who plans, the Son the one who accomplishes and the Spirit the one who brings to fruition the works of Father and Son. This is seen in creation (Gen 1:1-3) and in redemption. Thus, while full deity unqualifiedly belongs to the Son and the Spirit, the subordination of the Son to the Father seen in redemption reflects an eternal sonship, a subordination of relation not nature which heightens our wonder at the love of the Father who gave his Son, and at the obedience of the Son who came. The old wording is, however, less than unambiguously clear and hence has been rephrased in an attempt to make it more meaningful. (Ward)
3.1 God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.

Rowland Ward’s Translation
3.1 From all eternity God, by the most wise and holy purpose of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordained whatever comes to pass. He does this in such a way that he is not the author of sin, nor does he force his moral creatures to act against their will, nor is the free working of secondary causes taken away but instead it is established.

Commentary:
Ward says: “God’s plan and purpose is like himself - wise and holy. God has decreed the existence of all things, including sin, but his relationship to sin is not the same as his relationship to good, although we cannot explain the mystery involved. Still, God cannot contradict himself. He cannot author sin, cannot force moral creatures to do what their will does not consent to, and he does not destroy the relationship of cause and effect. Rather, just because his purpose embraces all, there is relationship between means used and results obtained. God rules, not chance, so that even what seems to be random is also under his authority.”

J.I. Packer explains: “The assertion of God’s absolute sovereignty in creation, providence, and grace is basic to biblical belief and biblical praise. The vision of God on the throne—that is, ruling—recurs (1 Kings 22:19; Isa. 6:1; Ezek. 1:26; Dan. 7:9; Rev. 4:2; cf. Pss. 11:4; 45:6; 47:8-9; Heb. 12:2; Rev. 3:21); and we are constantly told in explicit terms that the LORD (Yahweh) reigns as king, exercising dominion over great and tiny things alike (Exod. 15:18; Pss. 47; 93; 96:10; 97; 99:1-5; 146:10; Prov. 16:33; 21:1; Isa. 24:23; 52:7; Dan. 4:34-35; 5:21-28; 6:26; Matt. 10:29-31). God’s dominion is total: he wills as he chooses and carries out all that he wills, and none can stay his hand or thwart his plans.

That God’s rational creatures, angelic and human, have free agency (power of personal decision as to what they shall do) is clear in Scripture throughout; we would not be moral beings, answerable to God the judge, were it not so, nor would it then be possible to distinguish, as Scripture does, between the bad purposes of human agents and the good purposes of God, who sovereignly overrules human action as a planned means to his own goals (Gen. 50:20; Acts 2:23; 13:26-39). Yet the fact of free agency confronts us with mystery, inasmuch as God’s control over our free, self-determined activities is as complete as it is over anything else, and how this can be we do not know. Regularly, however, God exercises his sovereignty by letting things take their course, rather than by miraculous intrusions of a disruptive sort.

In Psalm 93 the fact of God’s sovereign rule is said to
(a) guarantee the stability of the world against all the forces of chaos (v. 1b-4),
(b) confirm the trustworthiness of all God’s utterances and directives (v. 5a), and
(c) call for the homage of holiness on the part of his people (v. .5b). The whole psalm expresses joy, hope, and confidence in God, and no wonder.

We shall do well to take its teaching to heart. (Concise Theology)
3.2 Although God knows whatsoever may or can come to pass upon all supposed conditions, yet hath he not decreed anything because he foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions.

**Modern Translation**

2. Although God knows whatever may or can come to pass under all conceivable conditions, yet he has not decreed anything because he foresaw it as future or as that which would come to pass under such conditions. (OPC, MESV).

**Rowland Ward's Translation**

3.2 God knows everything that may or can occur under all conceivable conditions. What he foresaw taking place in time is part of his decree, as is also the fulfilment of any condition.

**Commentary:**

God’s decree, the content of his foreordination, is not based on his foresight of the future, rather, the future is based on his decree. Ward says: “It has been claimed that some things are not decreed by God but are foreseen by God who acts upon them to bring about certain ends. This theory of conditional decrees is not infrequently advanced to support the notion that God’s election of his people is conditioned on his foresight that they will have faith. However, Scripture makes plain that people have faith because God has ordained that they will repent and believe. If God had not fixed the entire future his knowledge to some extent would be imperfect. Moreover, God would be dependent upon a creature, and salvation would not be based on grace but human qualities, and God would be reduced to ‘a far-seeing statesman’ (R.A.Finlayson). In short, God ordains the end, but also the fulfilment of all the conditions necessary to secure that end. He is not the prisoner of his creation, but its Lord.”

J.I. Packer comments: “Omniscient is a word that means “knowing everything.” Scripture declares that God’s eyes run everywhere (Job 24:23; Pss. 33:13-15, 139:13-16; Prov. 15:3; Jer. 16:17; Heb. 4:13). He searches all hearts and observes everyone’s ways (1 Sam. 16:7; 1 Kings 8:39; 1 Chron. 28:9; Ps. 139:1-6, 23; Jer. 17:10; Luke 16:15; Rom. 8:27; Rev. 2:23)—in other words, he knows everything about everything and everybody all the time. Also, he knows the future no less than the past and the present, and possible events that never happen no less than the actual events that do (1 Sam. 23:9-13; 2 Kings 13:19; Ps. 81:14-15; Isa. 48:18). Nor does he have to “access” information about things, as a computer might retrieve a file; all his knowledge is always immediately and directly before his mind. Bible writers stand in awe of the capacity of God’s mind in this regard (Pss. 139:1-6; 147:5; Isa. 40:13-14, 28; cf. Rom. 11:33-36).

God’s knowledge is linked with his sovereignty: he knows each thing, both in itself and in relation to all other things, because he created it, sustains it, and now makes it function every moment according to his plan for it (Eph. 1:11). The idea that God could know, and foreknow, everything without controlling everything seems not only unscriptural but nonsensical.

To the Christian believer, knowledge of God’s omniscience brings the assurance that he has not been forgotten, but is being and will be cared for according to God’s promise (Isa. 40:27-31). To anyone who is not a Christian, however, the truth of God’s universal knowledge must bring dread, for it comes as a reminder that one cannot hide either oneself or one’s sins from God’s view (Pss. 139:7-12; 94:1-11; John 1:1-12).” (Concise Theology)
3.3 By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestined unto everlasting life; and others foreordained to everlasting death.

Rowland Ward's Translation
3.3 By God's decree, to show his glory, some people and angels are predestined to everlasting life; and others foreordained to everlasting death.

Commentary:
J.I. Packer says: "The forty and more writers who produced the sixty-six books of Scripture over something like fifteen hundred years saw themselves and their readers as caught up in the outworking of God's sovereign purpose for his world, the purpose that led him to create, that sin then disrupted, and that his work of redemption is currently restoring. That purpose in essence was, and is, the endless expression and enjoyment of love between God and his rational creatures—love shown in their worship, praise, thanks, honor, glory, and service given to him, and in the fellowship, privileges, joys, and gifts that he gives to them. ¶ The writers look back at what has already been done to advance God's redemptive plan for sin-damaged planet earth, and they look ahead to the day of its completion, when planet earth will be re-created in unimaginable glory (Isa. 65:17-25; 2 Pet. 3:10-13; Rev. 21:1–22:5). They proclaim God as the almighty Creator-Redeemer and dwell constantly on the multifaceted works of grace that God performs in history to secure for himself a people, a great company of individuals together, with whom his original purpose of giving and receiving love can be fulfilled. And the writers insist that as God has shown himself absolutely in control in bringing his plan to the point it has reached as they write, so he will continue in total control, working out everything according to his own will and so completing his redemptive project. It is within this frame of reference (Eph. 1:9-14; 2:4-10; 3:8-11; 4:11-16) that questions about predestination belong.

Predestination is a word often used to signify God's foreordaining of all the events of world history, past, present, and future, and this usage is quite appropriate. In Scripture and mainstream theology, however, predestination means specifically God's decision, made in eternity before the world and its inhabitants existed, regarding the final destiny of individual sinners. In fact, the New Testament uses the words predestination and election (the two are one), only of God's choice of particular sinners for salvation and eternal life (Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:4-5, 11). Many have pointed out, however, that Scripture also ascribes to God an advance decision about those who finally are not saved (Rom. 9:6-29; 1 Pet. 2:8; Jude 4), and so it has become usual in Protestant theology to define God's predestination as including both his decision to save some from sin (election) and his decision to condemn the rest for their sin (reprobation), side by side.

To the question, "On what basis did God choose individuals for salvation?" it is sometimes replied: on the basis of his foreknowledge that when faced with the gospel they would choose Christ as their Savior. In that reply, foreknowledge means passive foresight on God's part of what individuals are going to do, without his predetermining their action. But (a) Foreknowledge in Romans 8:29; 11:2 (cf. 1 Pet. 1:2 and 1:20, where the NIV renders the Greek foreknown as "chosen") means "fore-love" and "fore-appoint": it does not express the idea of a spectator's anticipation of what will spontaneously happen. (b) Since all are naturally dead in sin (i.e., cut off from the life of God and unresponsive to him), no one who hears the gospel will ever come to repentance and faith without an inner quickening that only God can impart (Eph. 2:4-10). Jesus said: "No one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him" (John 6:65, cf. 44; 10:25-28). Sinners choose Christ only because God chose them for this choice and moved them to it by renewing their hearts. ¶ Though all human acts are free in the sense of being self-determined, none are free from God's control according to his eternal purpose and foreordination.

Christians should therefore thank God for their conversion, look to him to keep them in the grace into which he has brought them, and confidently await his final triumph, according to his plan.
Chapter 3 - Of God's Eternal Decree

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

Commentary:
Rowland Ward comments on 3.3. "In order to display his glorious perfections, and thus to communicate his blessedness to his moral creatures, God has predestined some to everlasting life - 'a great multitude which no man can number.' Others have been foreordained to everlasting death. Notice carefully that predestination is used in the Confession only of the saved while foreordination is reserved for the lost, and the term reprobation is not used. Predestination and foreordination as words are not dissimilar in their basic idea, but it is evident that the Confession follows its own teaching in 3:8, and thus makes every effort to highlight that God's dealings with the saved and the lost are based on different grounds. 'In the one instance we have an act of grace, determined by God's good will; in the other, an act of judgment, determined by the sin of the individual' (John Macpherson). 'Predestination reveals the goal of divine love and grace.... Since a goal is a perfect ideal, damnation is neither a goal nor an ideal. For even if sin and punishment are willed by God this is not an object of his delight as is the salvation of his elect' (R.A. Finlayson, Reformed Theological Writings, 1996, 262)."

Of 3.4 he says: “This straightforward section is designed to reaffirm that as the all-wise God is unchangeable and his plan perfect, so all within it is unchangeable. It is not fate or necessity but God’s decree that renders events certain.”

ANALYSIS WCF 3:1-8

1. The character and scope of God’s plan
   a. flows from himself
   b. he is not the author of sin
   c. he does not force moral creatures against their will
   d. he does not put aside ordinary relation of cause and effect

2. God’s plan and God’s knowledge
   a. God’s plan not based on foresight
   b. conditions ordained as well as ends

3 & 4. God’s plan and moral creatures
   a. embraces men and angels
   b. predestination to life
   c. foreordination to death
   d. absolutely unchangeable

5 & 6. God’s plan and human salvation
   a. Predestination in Christ
   b. reason for choice not in creature
   c. called in time through means of grace
   d. to the praise of God’s grace

7. God’s plan and human damnation
   a. Sovereign preterition (passing by)
   b. judicial condemnation - 'for their sin'
   c. to the praise of God’s justice

8. The proper use of the doctrine of predestination
   a. How, to whom and why it is to be preached
3.5 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.

Rowland Ward's Translation

3.5 Those of the human race who are predestined to life, God has chosen in Christ to everlasting glory. This choice was made according to God’s eternal and unchangeable purpose and the secret wisdom and good pleasure of his will before the foundation of the world was laid. It arose solely from his free grace and love and was not influenced by or dependent on any cause or condition in the person, whether foresight of faith or good works, perseverance in faith or works, or anything else in the person. God’s purpose is that all praise might be to his glorious grace.

Commentary:

A.A. Hodge says: “It [predestination] is not conditioned upon foreseen faith or repentance, but in each case upon sovereign grace and personal love, according to the secret counsel of his will.

(1) It is expressly declared not to rest upon works; but foreseen faith and repentance are works (Rom. 11:4-7; 2 Tim. 1:9).

(2) Faith and repentance are expressly said to be the fruits of election, and consequently cannot be its conditions. They are also declared to be the gifts of God, and cannot therefore be the conditions upon which he suspends his purpose (Eph. 2:10; 1:4; 1 Pet. 1:2; Eph. 2:8; Acts 5:31; 1 Cor. 4:7). “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and this is the Father’s will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing” (John 6:37,39). “But ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep” (John 10:26). "And as many as were ordained to eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48).

(3) The Scriptures represent men by nature as "dead in trespasses and sins"; and faith and repentance as the exercise of regenerated souls; and regeneration as the work of God—a "new birth," a "new creation," a "quickening from the dead." Faith and repentance, therefore, must be conditioned upon God’s purpose, and cannot condition it (Eph. 2:1; John 3:3,5; Eph. 2:5,10).

(4) The Scriptures expressly say that election is conditioned on the "good pleasure of God’s will": “Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace...In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will” (Eph. 1:5,11; Matt. 11:25,26; John 15:16,19).

(5) God claims the right of sovereign, unconditional election as his prerogative: "Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?” (Rom. 9:21). If of the same lump, the difference is not in the clay. "So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy” (Rom. 9:16).

The ultimate end or motive of God in election is the praise of his glorious grace. This is expressly asserted in Eph. 1:5,6,12. In the chapter on Creation it will be shown that the final end of God in all his works, as a whole, is the manifestation of his own glory. If it be the final end of the whole, it must be the end also of the special destination of all the parts.”
3.6 As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath he, by the eternal and most free purpose of his will, foreordained all the means thereunto. Wherefore, they who are elected, being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ, are effectually called unto faith in Christ by his Spirit working in due season, are justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept by his power, through faith, unto salvation. Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only.

**Modern Translation**

3.6 As God has appointed the elect to glory, so he has—by the eternal and most free purpose of his will—foreordained all the means to that end. Therefore, his chosen ones, all of them being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ and are effectually called to faith in Christ by his Spirit working in due season. They are justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept by his power, through faith, unto salvation. No others are redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, except the elect only. (OPC, MESV)

**Commentary:**

Rowland Ward says of 3.5 – “Notice the time of God’s choice, its nature as an act of grace, its reason as the good pleasure of God (cf. Matt 11:26), and the end in view - the praise of God’s grace. Those predestined to salvation are chosen in Christ. Divine election is not apart from Christ, nor is the end of salvation divorced from the means. As noted in 3:2 so here also is a rejection of the conditional decree theory. If foreseen faith is the ground of election then grace is denied. In fact, faith is a fruit of election, and the gift of God.”

Ward then offers this helpful comment and historical background on 3.6 – “God has ordained the means of salvation, and this section states that he effectively applies those means or causes them to be effectively used. Those who are saved are reckoned as ‘fallen in Adam’ that is, the decree of election is reckoned in order of logic as contemplating men who are already fallen. God did not create men in order to damn them, but he created men who, having fallen through their own disobedience, receive the just reward for their sin unless they are embraced in his gracious election.

A small group of Englishmen in the Westminster Assembly were influenced by the school of Moses Amyraut and John Cameron at Saumer in France. The Saumer theology modified Calvinism by positing that Christ died for the elect absolutely and for the reprobate conditionally, in case they should believe. This half-way house of ‘hypothetical universalism’ received no positive endorsement in the Confession despite the efforts of its sympathisers. However, it has been debated whether or not such views are actually excluded. A.F. Mitchell (Minutes., 1874, p. lii) thinks they may not be, but William Cunningham, the great Scottish theologian, is sure they are (Historical Theology Vol 2, 327ff) and with this Warfield agrees (The Westminster Assembly & its Work, 1931, 144). It is important to note that Cameron held that the absence from the findings of the Synod of Dort in 1619 of words such as the opening words of WCF 8:8 meant his views were not condemned by Dort. So the inclusion of the statement at 8:8 that all for whom Christ purchased redemption have the same effectively applied to them, shuts out the Amyraldian view.”

I would only add the comment that Derek Thomas and Guy Richard have convinced me that this chapter and section does not rule one way or the other on the famous supralapsarian/infralapsarian discussion.
Chapter 3 - Of God's Eternal Decree

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(3.7 God passed over the rest and ordained them to just punishment for their sin)

3.7 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 dishonor and wrath for their sin, to the praise of his glorious justice.

Commentary:
Ward says: “Concerning the lost there are two points (1) passing by (what is technically called preterition) and (2) condemnation. The passing by is not because of their sin, otherwise all would be passed by and no one could be saved. The passing by is sovereign - for God’s own reasons but not reasons in the creature. However, the condemnation is judicial - for their sin. Grace prepares some for glory, sin fits others for destruction (Rom 9:22-25). Only the deserving go to hell.”

Packer says: “Reprobation is the name given to God’s eternal decision regarding those sinners whom he has not chosen for life. His decision is in essence a decision not to change them, as the elect are destined to be changed, but to leave them to sin as in their hearts they already want to do, and finally to judge them as they deserve for what they have done. When in particular instances God gives them over to their sins (i.e., removes restraints on their doing the disobedient things they desire), this is itself the beginning of judgment. It is called “hardening” (Rom. 9:18; 11:25; cf. Ps. 81:12; Rom. 1:24, 26, 28), and it inevitably leads to greater guilt. Reprobation is a biblical reality (Rom. 9:14-24; 1 Pet. 2:8), but not one that bears directly on Christian behavior. The reprobates are faceless so far as Christians are concerned, and it is not for us to try to identify them. Rather, we should live in light of the certainty that anyone may be saved if he or she will but repent and put faith in Christ.”

Hodge comments: “This section teaches the following propositions: 1. That as God has sovereignly destinated certain persons, called the elect, through grace to salvation, so he has sovereignly decreed to withhold his grace from the rest; and that this withholding rests upon the unsearchable counsel of his own will, and is for the glory of his sovereign power. 2. That God has consequently determined to treat all those left in their sins with exact justice according to their own deserts, to the praise of his justice, which demands the punishment of all unexpiated sin.

This decree of reprobation, as it is called, is the aspect which God’s eternal purpose presents in its relation to that portion of the human family which shall be finally condemned for their sins. Reprobation consists of two elements, the negative and the positive. In its negative aspect God does not elect the reprobate, but “passes over” him; in this God is absolutely sovereign, resting upon His good pleasure alone, since those passed over are no worse than those elected. Positively, reprobation is not sovereign, but purely judicial, since God has determined to treat the reprobate according to what they deserve.

This doctrine, instead of being inconsistent with the principles of absolute justice, necessarily follows from the application of those principles to the case in hand. (1) All men alike are “by nature the children of wrath,” and justly obnoxious to the penalty of the law antecedently to the gift of Christ to be their Savior. It is because they are in this condition that vicarious satisfaction of divine justice was absolutely necessary in order to the salvation of any, otherwise, the apostle says, “Christ is dead in vain.” Hence if any are to be saved, justice itself demands that their salvation shall be recognized as not their right, but a sovereign concession on the part of God. None have a natural right to salvation. And the salvation of one cannot give a right to salvation to another. (2) Salvation is declared to be in its very essence a matter of grace; and if of grace, the selection of its subjects is inalienably a matter of divine discretion (Lam. 3:22; Rom. 4:4; 11:6; Eph. 1:5-7; John 3:16; 1 John 3:16; 4:10).

This doctrine as above stated is true- (1) Because it is necessarily involved in the scriptural doctrine of election taught in the preceding sections. (2) It is expressly taught in Scripture (Rom. 9:18; 1 Pet. 2:8; Rev. 13:8; Jude 4). (3) God asserts the right involved as his righteous prerogative (Rom. 9:19-23).”
3.8 The doctrine of predestination is to be handled carefully, and is designed to promote the assurance of believers, the praise of God, as well as humility, diligence and comfort.

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.

Modern Translation

3.8 The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care, so that men, taking heed to the will of God revealed in his Word and yielding obedience to it, may —from the certainty of their effectual calling —be assured of their eternal election. Thus, this doctrine shall provide reason for praise, reverence, and admiration of God; and for humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all who sincerely obey the gospel. (OPC, MESV)

Commentary:

Robert Shaw says: "The doctrine of predestination is, indeed, a high mystery - one of the deep things of God, which our feeble intellects cannot fully comprehend. In our inquiries about it, we ought to repress a vain curiosity, and not attempt to be wise above what is written. But, since the doctrine is revealed by God in his Word, it is a proper subject for sober investigation, and ought to be published from the pulpit and the press. Calvin justly remarks, "That those things which the Lord hath laid up in secret, we may not search; those things which he hath brought openly abroad, we may not neglect; lest either on the one part we be condemned of vain curiosity, or on the other part, of unthankfulness." Were this doctrine either dangerous or useless, God would not have revealed it; and for men to attempt to suppress it, is to arraign the wisdom of God, as though he foresaw not the danger which they would arrogantly interpose to prevent. "Whosoever," adds Calvin, "labours to bring the doctrine of predestination into misliking, he openly saith evil of God; as though somewhat had unadvisedly slipped from him which is hurtful to the Church." This doctrine, however, ought to be handled with special judgment and prudence, avoiding human speculations, and adhering to what is plainly revealed in the Scriptures. When prudently discussed, it will neither lead to licentiousness nor to despair; but will eminently conduce to the knowledge, establishment, and comfort of Christians.

It ought ever to be remembered, that no man can know his election prior to his conversion. Wherefore, instead of prying into the secret purpose of God, he ought to attend to his revealed will, that by making sure his vocation, he may ascertain his election. The order and method in which this knowledge may be attained is pointed out by the Apostle Peter, when he exhorts Christians to "give all diligence to make their calling and election sure."—2 Pet. i. 10. Their eternal election must remain a profound secret until it be discovered to them by their effectual calling in time; but when they have ascertained their calling they may thence infallibly conclude that they were elected from eternity. Election, then, gives no discouragement to any man in reference to obeying the calls and embracing the offers of the gospel. The invitations of the gospel are not addressed to men as elect, but as sinners ready to perish; all are under the same obligation to comply with these invitations, and the encouragement from Christ is the same to all,—"Him that cometh to me, I will in no wise cast out." And the doctrine of election must have a sanctifying and consoling influence on all who sincerely obey the gospel. It is calculated to inspire them with sentiments of reverence and gratitude towards God; to humble their souls in the dust before the eternal Sovereign; to excite them to diligence in the discharge of duty; to afford them strong consolation under the temptations and trials of life; and to animate them with a lively hope of eternal glory."
Chapter 4 - Of Creation

(4.1 The Triune God for the display of his glory created the entire world in six days and all good)

4.1 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.

4.1 In the beginning it pleased the Triune God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - to make known the glory of his eternal power, wisdom, and goodness, by creating, or making out of nothing, the world and all things in it, whether visible or invisible, in the space of six days, and all very good. (Ward)

Commentary:
Robert Shaw says: "By the word creation we are to understand the production and formation of all things. This section teaches us:—

1. That the world had a beginning. This will now be considered one of the most obvious truths that can be stated, but it is one that required to be confirmed by divine revelation. That the world existed from eternity was generally maintained by the ancient heathen philosophers. Some of them held, that not only the matter of which the world is framed existed from eternity, but that it subsisted in that beautiful form in which we behold it. Others admitted that the heavens and the earth had a beginning in respect of their present form, but maintained the eternity of the matter of which they are composed. That the world had a beginning is the uniform doctrine of the Scriptures.—Gen. i. 1; Ps. xc. 2. This is implied in the phrases, "before the foundation of the world," "before the world began." - Eph. i. 4; 2 Tim. i. 9.

2. That creation is the work of God. Often does God claim this work as one of the peculiar glories of his Deity, to the exclusion of all others.—Is. xliv. 24, xlv. 12. The work of creation, however, is common to all the three persons of the Trinity. It is ascribed to the Father, - 1 Cor. viii. 6; to the Son, - John i. 3; to the Holy Ghost.—Gen. i. 2; Job xxvi. 13. All the three persons are one God. We must not, therefore, suppose that in creation the Father is the principal agent, and the Son and the Holy Ghost inferior agents, or mere instruments. In all external works of Deity, each of the persons of the Godhead equally concur.

3. That creation extends to "the world, and all things therein, whether visible or invisible." This is expressly declared in many passages of Scripture: "God made the world, and all things therein."—Acts xxvii. 24. "By him were all things created that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible."—Col. i. 16. This certainly includes angels. We have no reason to think that their creation preceded the period of the Mosaic creation; and they are generally supposed to have been created on the first day.

4. That the world, and all things therein, were created "in the space of six days." This, also, is the express language of Scripture: "For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is."—Ex. xx. 11.

5. That all things were created very good. Everything was good; for it was agreeable to the model which the great Architect had formed in his infinite mind from everlasting; it answered exactly the end of its creation, and was adapted to the purpose for which it was designed.

6. That God made all things for the manifestation of his own glory: "The Lord hath made all things for himself," for the manifestation of his infinite perfections; and all his works proclaim his almighty power, his unbounded goodness, and his unsearchable wisdom. His glory shines in every part of the material universe; but it would shined in vain, if there had been no creature to contemplate it with an eye of intelligence, and celebrate the praises of the omnipotent Creator. Man, therefore, was introduced into the habitation which had been prepared for him, and of his creation the next section gives an account.”
4.2 After God had made all other creatures, he created man, male and female, with reasonable and immortal souls, endued with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness, after his own image; having the law of God written in their hearts, and power to fulfil it: and yet under a possibility of transgressing, being left to the liberty of their own will, which was subject unto change. Beside this law written in their hearts, they received a command, not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; which while they kept, they were happy in their communion with God, and had dominion over the creatures.

Commentary:

Packer says: "The statement at the start of the Bible (Gen. 1:26-27, echoed in 5:1; 9:6; 1 Cor. 11:7; James 3:9) that God made man in his own image, so that humans are like God as no other earthly creatures are, tells us that the special dignity of being human is that, as humans, we may reflect and reproduce at our own creaturely level the holy ways of God, and thus act as his direct representatives on earth. This is what humans are made to do, and in one sense we are human only to the extent that we are doing it.

The scope of God's image in man is not defined in Genesis 1:26-27, but the context makes it clear. Genesis 1:1-25 sets forth God as personal, rational (having intelligence and will, able to form plans and execute them), creative, competent to control the world he has made, and morally admirable, in that all he creates is good. Plainly, God's image will include all these qualities. Verses 28-30 show God blessing newly created humans (that must mean telling them their privilege and destiny) and setting them to rule creation as his representatives and deputies. The human capacity for communication and relationship with both God and other humans, and the God-given dominion over the lower creation (highlighted in Ps. 8 as the answer to the question, What is man?), thus appear as further facets of the image.

God's image in man at Creation, then, consisted (a) in man's being a "soul" or "spirit" (Gen. 2:7, where the NIV correctly says "living being"; Eccles. 12:7), that is, a personal, self-conscious, Godlike creature with a Godlike capacity for knowledge, thought, and action; (b) in man's being morally upright, a quality lost at the Fall that is now being progressively restored in Christ (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10); (c) in man's environmental dominion. Usually, and reasonably, it is added that (d) man's God-given immortality and (e) the human body, through which we experience reality, express ourselves, and exercise our dominion, belong to the image too.

The body belongs to the image, not directly, since God, as we noted earlier, does not have one, but indirectly, inasmuch as the Godlike activities of exercising dominion over the material creation and demonstrating affection to other rational beings make our embodiment necessary. There is no fully human life without a functioning body, whether here or hereafter. That truth, implicit in Genesis 1, was made explicit by the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ: as the true image of God in his humanity as well as in his divinity. The glorified Lord Jesus is embodied to all eternity, just as Christians will be.

The Fall diminished God's image not only in Adam and Eve but in all their descendants, that is, the whole human race. We retain the image structurally, in the sense that our humanity is intact, but not functionally, for we are now sin's slaves and unable to use our powers to mirror God's holiness. Regeneration begins the process of restoring God's moral image in our lives, but not till we are fully sanctified and glorified shall we reflect God perfectly in thought and action as mankind was made to do and as the incarnate Son of God in his humanity did and does (John 4:34; 5:30; 6:38; 8:29, 46; Rom. 6:4, 5, 10; 8:11)." (Concise Theology)
Chapter 5 - Of Providence

5.1 God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.

Commentary:

Packer says: "'God's works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions' (Westminster Shorter Catechism Q.11). If Creation was a unique exercise of divine energy causing the world to be, providence is a continued exercise of that same energy whereby the Creator, according to his own will, (a) keeps all creatures in being, (b) involves himself in all events, and (c) directs all things to their appointed end. The model is of purposive personal management with total "hands-on" control: God is completely in charge of his world. His hand may be hidden, but his rule is absolute.

Some have restricted God's providence to foreknowledge without control, or upholding without intervention, or general oversight without concern for details, but the testimony to providence as formulated above is overwhelming.

The Bible clearly teaches God's providential control (1) over the universe at large, Ps. 103:19; Dan. 4:35; Eph. 1:11; (2) over the physical world, Job 37; Pss. 104:14; 135:6; Matt. 5:45; (3) over the brute creation, Ps. 104:21, 28; Matt. 6:26; 10:29; (4) over the affairs of nations, Job 12:23; Pss. 22:28; 66:7; Acts 17:26; (5) over man's birth and lot in life, 1 Sam. 16:1; Ps. 139:16; Isa. 45:5; Gal. 1:15-16; (6) over the outward successes and failures of men's lives, Ps. 75:6, 7; Luke 1:52; (7) over things seemingly accidental or insignificant, Prov. 16:33; Matt. 10:30; (8) in the protection of the righteous, Pss. 4:8; 5:12, 63:8; 121:3; Rom. 8:28; (9) in supplying the wants of God's people, Gen. 22:8, 14; Deut. 8:3; Phil. 4:19; (10) in giving answers to prayer, 1 Sam. 1:19; Isa. 20:5, 6; 2 Chron. 33:13; Ps. 65:2; Matt. 7:7; Luke 18:7, 8; and (11) in the exposure and punishment of the wicked, Pss. 7:12-13; 11:6. (L. Berkhof, Systematic Theology, 4th ed.)

Clear thinking about God's involvement in the world-process and in the acts of rational creatures requires complementary sets of statements, thus: a person takes action, or an event is triggered by natural causes, or Satan shows his hand—yet God overrules. This is the message of the book of Esther, where God's name nowhere appears. Again: things that are done contravene God's will of command—yet they fulfill his will of events (Eph. 1:11). Again: humans mean what they do for evil—yet God who overrules uses their actions for good (Gen. 50:20; Acts 2:23). Again: humans, under God's overruling, sin—yet God is not the author of sin (James 1:13-17); rather, he is its judge.

The nature of God's "concurrent" or "confluent" involvement in all that occurs in his world, as—without violating the nature of things, the ongoing causal processes, or human free agency—he makes his will of events come to pass, is mystery to us, but the consistent biblical teaching about God's involvement is as stated above.

Of the evils that infect God's world (moral and spiritual perversity, waste of good, and the physical disorders and disruptions of a spoiled cosmos), it can summarily be said: God permits evil (Acts 14:16); he punishes evil with evil (Ps. 81:11-12; Rom. 1:26-32); he brings good out of evil (Gen. 50:20; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28; 13:27; 1 Cor. 2:7-8); he uses evil to test and discipline those he loves (Matt. 4:1-11; Heb. 12:4-14); and one day he will redeem his people from the power and presence of evil altogether (Rev. 21:27; 22:14-15).

The doctrine of providence teaches Christians that they are never in the grip of blind forces (fortune, chance, luck, fate); all that happens to them is divinely planned, and each event comes as a new summons to trust, obey, and rejoice, knowing that all is for one's spiritual and eternal good (Rom. 8:28)."
5.2 Although, in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first Cause, all things come to pass immutably, and infallibly; yet, by the same providence, he ordereth them to fall out, according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.

Rowland Ward’s Translation
5.2 In relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the absolute Creator, all things happen unchangeably and infallibly. However, in his providence God directs events to occur through the agency of secondary causes. In relation to such secondary causes some events are inevitable, others depend on the voluntary choice of the creature, and others occur dependently and unpredictably. (Ward, modified/JLD3)

Commentary:
Two great biblical examples of this “concurrent operation” of God’s providence are found in 1 Kings 22:1-40 and Acts 27:1-28:6. God is in control of everything but the choices and actions of his creature matter, and are in a very real sense free. Once again, the Confession is taking care to make sure that we understand that Calvinism is not determinism. Don Carson (and other theologians and philosophers) call the biblical view “compatibilism.” Compatibilism is the view that God’s sovereignty and human responsibility are compatible not contradictory. Both/and, not either/or.

Ward says, of 5.2, “Our experience is that a certain end comes to pass as a result of a chain of contingent events. The Bible affirms that such an end is predetermined by God because he has ordained the means as well as the end. It is common for people to say that if God has decreed everything nothing we can do will make any difference. This is false. The truth is that since God has established means or second causes, such means are real. The Confession gives ‘a simple statement of a mystery which cannot be explained: the consistency of a belief in the supreme all-determining first cause, and a belief in the reign of law in nature, and the freedom of action among intelligent creatures’ (John Macpherson).”

J.I. Packer says, of sovereignty and responsibility in general: “The assertion of God’s absolute sovereignty in creation, providence, and grace is basic to biblical belief and biblical praise. The vision of God on the throne—that is, ruling—recurs (1 Kings 22:19; Isa. 6:1; Ezek. 1:26; Dan. 7:9; Rev. 4:2; cf. Pss. 11:4; 45:6; 47:8-9; Heb. 12:2; Rev. 3:21); and we are constantly told in explicit terms that the LORD (Yahweh) reigns as king, exercising dominion over great and tiny things alike (Exod. 15:18; Pss. 47; 93; 96:10; 97; 99:1-5; 146:10; Prov. 16:33; 21:1; Isa. 24:23; 52:7; Dan. 4:34-35; 5:21-28; 6:26; Matt. 10:29-31). God’s dominion is total: he wills as he chooses and carries out all that he wills, and none can stay his hand or thwart his plans.

That God’s rational creatures, angelic and human, have free agency (power of personal decision as to what they shall do) is clear in Scripture throughout; we would not be moral beings, answerable to God the judge, were it not so, nor would it then be possible to distinguish, as Scripture does, between the bad purposes of human agents and the good purposes of God, who sovereignly overrules human action as a planned means to his own goals (Gen. 50:20; Acts 2:23; 13:26-39). Yet the fact of free agency confronts us with mystery, inasmuch as God’s control over our free, self-determined activities is as complete as it is over anything else, and how this can be we do not know. Regularly, however, God exercises his sovereignty by letting things take their course, rather than by miraculous intrusions of a disruptive sort.

In Psalm 93 the fact of God’s sovereign rule is said to (a) guarantee the stability of the world against all the forces of chaos (v. 1b–4), (b) confirm the trustworthiness of all God’s utterances and directives (v. 5a), and (c) call for the homage of holiness on the part of his people (v. 5b). The whole psalm expresses joy, hope, and confidence in God, and no wonder. We shall do well to take its teaching to heart.”
Chapter 5 - Of Providence

(5.3 God ordinarily uses means to accomplish his ends, but sometimes without, over or against them)

5.3 God, in his ordinary providence, maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure.

**Modern Translation**

5.3 In his ordinary providence, God makes use of means, yet he is free to work without, above, and against them as he pleases. (OPC, MESV)

**Rowland Ward’s Translation**

5.3 In the ordinary course of his providence God makes use of means, yet, as he pleases, he is free to work without them, to give them effect beyond what they normally possess, and to work against their ordinary operation.

**Commentary:**

Ward says: “It is God’s wise and good will to use means that are suited to secure the desired end, but God is not bound by his ordinary way of working. What we call a miracle - God working without, above or against ordinary means - is the outworking of God’s freedom of action.”

Shaw says: “The providence of God is either ordinary or miraculous. In his ordinary providence God works by means, and according to the general laws established by his own wisdom: we are, therefore, bound to use the means which he has appointed, and if we neglect these, we cannot expect to obtain the end. But though God generally acts according to established laws, yet he may suspend or modify these laws at pleasure. And when, by his immediate agency, an effect is produced above or beside the ordinary course of nature, this we denominate a miracle. The possibility of miracles will be denied by none but Atheists.”

Of miracles in general, J.I. Packer says: “Scripture has no single word for miracle. The concept is a blend of the thoughts expressed by three terms: wonder, mighty work, and sign. Wonder is the primary notion. (Miracle, from the Latin miraculum, means something that evokes wonder.) A miracle is an observed event that triggers awareness of God’s presence and power. Striking providences and coincidences, and awesome events such as childbirth, no less than works of new creative power, are properly called miracles since they communicate this awareness. In this sense, at least, there are miracles today.

Mighty work (work of power) focuses on the impression that miracles make, and points to the presence in Bible history of supernatural acts of God involving the power that created the world from nothing. Thus, the raising of the dead to life, which Jesus did three times, not counting his own resurrection (Luke 7:11-17; 8:49-56; John 11:38-44), and Elijah, Elisha, Peter, and Paul did once each (1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:18-37; Acts 9:36-41; 20:9-12), is a work of this creative power; it cannot be explained in terms of coincidence or of nature taking its course. The same is true of organic healings, of which the Gospels recount many; they too exhibit supernatural re-creating and restoring.

Signs as a label for miracles (the label regularly used in John’s Gospel, where seven key miracles are recorded) means that they signify something: in other words, they carry a message. The miracles in Scripture are nearly all clustered in the time of the Exodus, of Elijah and Elisha, and of Christ and his apostles. First of all, they authenticate the miracle workers themselves as God’s representatives and messengers (cf. Exod. 4:1-9; 1 Kings 17:24; John 10:38; 14:11; 2 Cor. 12:12; Heb. 2:3-4); and they also show forth something of God’s power in salvation and judgment. Such is their significance.

Belief in the miraculous is integral to Christianity. Theologians who discard all miracles, thus obliging themselves to deny Jesus’ incarnation and resurrection, the two supreme miracles of Scripture, should not claim to be Christians: the claim is not valid. The rejection of miracles by yesterday’s scientists sprang not from science but from the dogma of a universe of absolute uniformity that scientists brought to their scientific work. There is nothing irrational about believing that God who made the world can still intrude creatively into it. Christians should recognize that it is not faith in the biblical miracles, and in God’s ability to work miracles today should he so wish, but doubt about these things, that is unreasonable.”
Chapter 5 - Of Providence

(5.4 God is sovereign over even the worst of evil, but he is not responsible for sin and does not condone any wickedness)

5.4 The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God so far manifest themselves in his providence, that it extendeth itself even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men; and that not by a bare permission, but such as hath joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering, and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to his own holy ends; yet so, as the sinfulness thereof proceedeth only from the creature, and not from God, who, being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin.

Rowland Ward’s Translation

5.4 God’s almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness are so far-reaching that his providence extends even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and human beings. It is not simply that he permits them, for in a variety of ways he wisely and powerfully sets limits, and appoints and governs them so that they fulfill his own holy ends. Yet the sinfulness involved comes only from the creature, and not from God, who, being most holy and righteous, is not and cannot be the author or approver of sin.

Commentary:

The biblical idea expressed in this section is the basis of John Piper’s new book Spectacular Sins (Crossway). Here’s what Piper says in the introduction: “At the all-important pivot of human history, the worst sin ever committed served to show the greatest glory of Christ and obtain the sin-conquering gift of God’s grace. God did not just overcome evil at the cross. He made evil serve the overcoming of evil. He made evil commit suicide in doing its worst evil.” And the question, the very practical question that Piper (and this chapter of the Confession) want to get at is: “If God governs the sinful acts of men, and all authority in heaven and earth has been given to Jesus, then how are we to think about God’s purposes in relation to the devastation caused by terrorists, dictators, murderers, cheats, and abusers? When heart-rending news comes of the latest accident, illness, or natural disaster, can we really believe that in Jesus, “all things hold together”?”

Rowland Ward observes: “It is commonly represented by many Christians, and is the position of the Council of Trent of the Church of Rome, that God’s relationship to sin is simply one of permission. However, mere permission or failing to prevent does not exhaust Scripture on this subject. Hence we can understand that the two statements concerning David’s numbering of the people are both true: that God moved David to this act (2 Sam 24:1) and that Satan did so (1 Chronicles 21:1). ‘In regard to the action itself, which was sinful as produced or performed by Satan and David, God did more than merely permit it...He did do something in the way of its being brought about’ (William Cunningham, Historical Theology). This is carefully expressed in the Confession, but of course is a matter of difficulty for our minds and is to be handled with great care.”

Robert Shaw (sounding like Piper two centuries before him) says: “The most atrocious crime ever perpetrated by human hands was the crucifixion of the Lord of glory; yet it is expressly affirmed that God delivered him into those wicked hands which were imbrued in his sacred blood: “Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain.”—Acts ii. 23. At the same time, it is indisputable that God cannot be the author nor approver of sin. To solve the difficulty connected with this point, theologians distinguish between an action and its quality. The action, abstractly considered, is from God, for no action can be performed without the concurrence of Providence; but the sinfulness of the action proceeds entirely from the creature. As to the manner in which the providence of God is concerned about the sinful actions of creatures, it is usually stated, that God permit them, that he limits them, and that he overrules them for the accomplishment of his own holy ends. But the full elucidation of this abstruse subject, so as to remove every difficulty, surpasses the human faculties. We are certain that God is concerned in all the actions of his creatures; we are equally certain that God cannot be the author of sin; and here we ought to rest.”
Chapter 5 - Of Providence  

(5.5 God exercises a pastoral providence over sin and temptation for the sake of his people)

5.5 The most wise, righteous, and gracious God doth oftentimes leave, for a season, his own children to manifold temptations, and the corruption 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 sundry other just and holy ends.

Rowland Ward’s Translation

5.5 God, who is most wise, righteous and gracious, frequently leaves his own children to fall for a time into a variety of temptations, and to experience the corruption of their own hearts. This he does to chastise them for the sins they have committed, or to teach them humility by revealing to them the hidden strength of the corruption and deceitfulness remaining in their hearts. He would also bring them to depend more fully and constantly on himself, put them on guard against all future opportunities for sin, and fulfil various other just and holy ends.

ANALYSIS  

| WCF 5:1-7 |
| --- | --- |
| 1. The Nature of Providence |
| 2-3. God’s Providence and the use of means |
| a. God has ordained everything including means |
| b. Means are real |
| c. God is not limited by means |
| 4. Providence and sin in general |
| 5. Providence and the sin of believers |
| 6. Providence and the sin of the ungodly |
| 7. Providence and the care of the church |

Commentary:

Ward says: “In dealing with his own children God remains sovereign in respect of evil. They sin just as they do good, hence God disapproves the one and endorses the other. But through all, he works his holy purpose toward them.”

Shaw comments: “God cannot possibly solicit or seduce any man to sin; for this is inconsistent with the purity of his nature. - James i. 13,14. But, in righteous judgment, God sometimes permits persons to fall into one sin for the punishment of another. He deals in this way even with his own dear, but undutiful, children. Sometimes he leaves them for a season to temptations, and to the lusts of their own hearts, for their trial, or to discover to themselves the latent corruptions of their hearts, to humble them, and to excite them to more fervent prayer and unremitting watchfulness. Thus, God left Hezekiah to try him, that he might know, or make known, all that was in his heart.—2 Chron. xxxii. 31. Sometimes God deals in this manner with his own children to chastise them for their former sins. Thus, “The anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he moved David against them to say, Go number Israel and Judah.” - 2 Sam. xxiv. 1.”

Hodge says: “Hence in the way of discipline for their own good, to mortify their sins and to strengthen their graces, God often wisely and graciously, though never finally, for a season and to a degree, withdraws his spiritual influences from his own children, and leaves them to the manifold temptations and corruptions of their own hearts.”
Chapter 5 - Of Providence

(5.6 God exercises a justly judging providence in relation to the sins of the wicked)

5.6 As for those wicked and ungodly men whom God, as a righteous Judge, for former sins, doth blind and harden, from them he not only withholdeth his grace whereby they might have been enlightened in their understandings, and wrought upon in their hearts; but sometimes also withdraweth the gifts which they had, and exposeth them to such objects as their corruption makes occasions of sin; and, withal, gives them over to their own lusts, 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.

Rowland Ward’s Translation

5.6 God, as a righteous Judge, deals otherwise with wicked and ungodly people. For their former sins he blinds and hardens them. He not only withholds from them the grace that might have enlightened their minds and changed their hearts, but in some cases also withdraws the gifts he had given them, and places them in situations on which their evil hearts seize as opportunities for sin. In this way he gives them over to their own lusts, the temptations of the world, and to the power of Satan, with the consequence that they harden themselves, even under those means which God uses for the softening of others.

Commentary:

This is a hard truth, but very clearly biblical. Romans 1:24-28 teaches this truth directly (notice the repetition of the phrase “God gave them up” or “God gave them over”). See also Psalm 81:11-12 and 2 Thessalonians 2:10-12). The classic personal examples of this in the Bible are Esau and Pharaoh (see Exodus 4:21 and 14:4), the Lord in his providence judges them and determines not to give them his grace to turn them from their sins, and consequently they do what they themselves desire to do, which ends up leading them to their own ruin. Thus Malachi 1:2-3 tell us that the Lord loved Jacob and hated Esau. And Romans 9 tells us that the distinction between Jacob and Esau is meant to teach us that salvation is all of grace and all of God and not due to our own deserving or efforts — “in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls” (Rom 9:11 ESV).

Ward says: “God’s providence also embraces the hardening of men in sin. This is a matter of justice because of their previous sins, and is largely a withholding of his gracious influences. The case of the Pharaoh of the exodus is significant. In the account of the first five plagues he is said to have hardened his heart, and only with the sixth plague do we read also that God hardened his heart. Still, before Moses returned to Egypt to lead his people God had said what he would do to display his power over Pharaoh (Ex 4:21). ‘By withdrawing any restraining influences on Pharaoh and by directly challenging his status, the LORD brought it about that the full extent of Pharaoh’s stubbornness and opposition became evident. It would thus be manifest that what happened in the release of the Israelites was no voluntary act of Pharaoh, but a victory won over him by the superior power of Yahweh.’ (John L. Mackay, Exodus (2001), 133).”

Shaw says: “In Scripture, God is frequently said to harden wicked men for their former sins. This he does, not by infusing any wickedness into their hearts, or by any direct and positive influence on their souls in rendering them obdurate, but by withholding his grace, which is necessary to soften their hearts, and which he is free to give or withhold as he pleases; by giving them over to their own hearts’ lusts, to the temptations of the world, and the power of Satan; and by providentially placing them in each circumstances, or presenting such objects before them, as their corruption makes an occasion of hardening themselves.”

Hodge says: “Hence also God often, as a just punishment of their sins, judicially withdraws the restraints of his Spirit, and consequently whatever superficial gifts his presence may have conferred, from ungodly men, and thus leaves them to the influence of temptations, the unrestrained control of their lusts, and the power of Satan. And hence it comes to pass that the truths of the gospel and the ordinances of the Church, which are a savor of life to them to whom they are graciously blessed, become a savor of death and of increased condemnation to them who for their sins have been left to themselves.
Chapter 5 - Of Providence

(5.7 God’s special providence is over his church, protecting the church and assuring that all things work together for good for the church)

5.7 As the providence of God doth, in general, reach to all creatures; so, after a most special manner, it taketh care of his church, and disposeth all things to the good thereof.

Rowland Ward’s Translation

5.7 God’s providence extends to all creatures, but in a very special way God directs it to the care of his church, and arranges all things for its good.

Commentary:

Ward says: “God’s care extends to all things but has special reference to the church. It is not that God is a caretaker with little interest in the day to day affairs of the creation. Nor is he the God whom we appeal to simply in order to explain the gaps in our knowledge that we have not yet filled. But he is the God who holds the whole world in his hands and who directs all things to the destined end that all things might be brought under one head, even Christ (Ephesians 1:10 cf. vv 22-23).”

Shaw says: “The providence of God may be considered as general and as special. His general providence is exercised about all his creatures; his special providence is exercised, in a particular manner, about his Church and people. "The eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show himself strong in behalf of them whose heart is perfect towards him."—2 Chron. xvi. 9. God has the interests of his own people ever in view; he knows what is most conducive to their happiness; and he will make all things, whether prosperous or adverse, to co-operate in promoting their good, - Rom. viii. 28. In all past ages, God has watched over his Church with peculiar and unremitting care; he has sometimes permitted her to be reduced to a very low condition, but he has also wrought surprising deliverances in her behalf. The very means which her enemies intended for her destruction and ruin have, by an overruling Providence, been rendered subservient to her edification and enlargement.—Acts viii. 4. The preservation of the Church, in spite of the craft and malice of hell, and of all the pernicious errors and bloody persecutions which have threatened her ruin, is no less wonderful than the spectacle which Moses beheld,—a bush burning but not consumed. And let us still confide and rejoice in the promise of Christ, that the gates of hell shall never prevail against his Church.”

Quotes on Providence:

There are no accidents in the life of a Christian. Rowland Bingham

I have lived, seen God’s hand through a lifetime, and all was for best. Robert Browning

Either directly or indirectly, every providence has a tendency to the spiritual good of those who love God. Matthew Henry

Providence has ordered that condition for you which is best for your eternal good. If you had more of the world than you have, your heads and hearts might not be able to manage it to your advantage. John Flavel

A firm faith in the universal providence of God is the solution of all earthly problems. It is almost equally true that a clear and full apprehension of the universal providence of God is the solution of most theological problems. Benjamin B. Warfield

God is to be trusted when his providences seem to run contrary to his promises. Thomas Watson
6.1 Our first parents, being seduced by the subtlety and temptation of Satan, sinned, in eating the forbidden fruit. This their sin, God was pleased, according to his wise and holy counsel, to permit, having purposed to order it to his own glory.

Commentary:

J.I. Packer says: “Paul, in Romans, affirms that all mankind is naturally under the guilt and power of sin, the reign of death, and the inescapable wrath of God (Rom. 3:9, 19; 5:17, 21; 1:18-19; cf. the whole section, 1:18–3:20). He traces this back to the sin of the one man whom, when speaking at Athens, he described as our common ancestor (Rom. 5:12-14; Acts 17:26; cf. 1 Cor. 15:22). This is authoritative apostolic interpretation of the history recorded in Genesis 3, where we find the account of the Fall, the original human lapse from God and godliness into sin and lostness. The main points in that history, as seen through the lens of Paul’s interpretation, are as follows:

(a) God made the first man the representative for all his posterity, just as he was to make Jesus Christ the representative for all God’s elect (Rom. 5:15-19 with 8:29-30; 9:22-26). In each case the representative was to involve those whom he represented in the fruits of his personal action, whether for good or ill, just as a national leader involves his people in the consequences of his action when, for instance, he declares war. This divinely chosen arrangement, whereby Adam would determine the destiny of his descendants, has been called the covenant of works, though this is not a biblical phrase.

(b) God set the first man in a state of happiness and promised to continue this to him and his posterity after him if he showed fidelity by a course of perfect positive obedience and specifically by not eating from a tree described as the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It would seem that the tree bore this name because the issue was whether Adam would let God tell him what was good and bad for him or would seek to decide that for himself, in disregard of what God had said. By eating from this tree Adam would, in effect, be claiming that he could know and decide what was good and evil for him without any reference to God.

(c) Adam, led by Eve, who was herself led by the serpent (Satan in disguise: 2 Cor. 11:3 with v. 14; Rev. 12:9), defied God by eating the forbidden fruit. The results were that, first, the anti-God, self-aggrandizing mindset expressed in Adam’s sin became part of him and of the moral nature that he passed on to his descendants (Gen. 6:5; Rom. 3:9-20). Second, Adam and Eve found themselves gripped by a sense of pollution and guilt that made them ashamed and fearful before God—with good reason. Third, they were cursed with expectations of pain and death, and they were expelled from Eden. At the same time, however, God began to show them saving mercy; he made them skin garments to cover their nakedness, and he promised that the woman’s seed would one day break the serpent’s head. This foreshadowed Christ.

Though telling the story in a somewhat figurative style, Genesis asks us to read it as history; in Genesis, Adam is linked to the patriarchs and with them to the rest of mankind by genealogy (chs. 5, 10, 11), which makes him as much a part of space-time history as were Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. All the book’s main characters after Adam, except Joseph, are shown as sinners in one way or another, and the death of Joseph, like the death of almost everyone else in the story, is carefully recorded (Gen. 50:22-26); Paul’s statement “In Adam all die” (1 Cor. 15:22) only makes explicit what Genesis already clearly implies.

It may fairly be claimed that the Fall narrative gives the only convincing explanation of the perversity of human nature that the world has ever seen. Pascal said that the doctrine of original sin seems an offense to reason, but once accepted it makes total sense of the entire human condition. He was right, and the same thing may and should be said of the Fall narrative itself.”
Chapter 6 - Of the Fall of Man, of Sin and of the Punishment Thereof

(6.2 The Results of the fall for Adam and Eve)

6.2 By this sin they fell from their original righteousness and communion with God, and so became dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all the parts and faculties of soul and body.

Commentary:
The first effect of the fall was that God broke communion with man. God and man had enjoyed sweet fellowship in the Garden prior to man’s rebellion, now all that was ended. Man had indeed turned aside from God. He was at fault for the disruption in his communion with God, but we must understand very clearly that it was God who broke off communion with man. God, because of His attribute of holiness, was unable to associate with the wretchedness which man had become. God poured wrath, indignation, condemnation and curses on Adam. He cursed the serpent (Genesis 3:14,15), He cursed Eve (Genesis 3:16), He cursed the earth (Genesis 3:17) because of Adam and He cursed Adam (Genesis 3:17-19). God was revealing His wrath from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness. It is important to note that God took initiative in separating Himself from man. God drove man from the garden (Genesis 3:24). God closed the way for man to approach him. Cherubim stood at the east of the Garden to make sure that no depraved sinner would enter the garden of the Holy God.

A second effect of the fall was that immediately accompanying the first sin was the total depravity of man’s nature. This depravity affected every part of man’s being. Out of this corruption comes the subjective side of man’s broken relations with God. Originally man enjoyed God’s presence now he hides from Him (Genesis 3:8). This corruption of nature is passed down to all of Adam’s descendants and is itself sin. Thus not only are we responsible for “actual sins,” that is, sins that we willfully, knowingly, commit but also we are responsible for the very tendency of our nature to sin. Both are effects of the fall and both are we responsible for in God’s eyes. Not until God glorifies His people will this sin nature and its out-workings be finally destroyed.

A third effect of the fall was that the world was cursed because of man’s sin. “Cursed is the ground because of you,” (Genesis 3:17). The whole of man’s environment suffers the consequences of man’s disobedience. Now, instead of a world which cooperates in man’s labor, man is thrust into a world where labor will be toilsome. Now there will be weeds, thorns, thistles, and parasites for man to battle. Now weather and insects will damage the fruits of his labor. It will lead him to even despise labor. This despising of labor, which, incidentally is quite prevalent in our society, is a result of the fall. Labor is a creation ordinance, only the fall made it toilsome. In heaven we will labor without toil.

A fourth effect of the fall is man’s alienation from man. Adam and Eve lived in perfection, before the fall. They loved one another perfectly. The fall brought enmity, distrust and self-centeredness to the relationship. Man seeks to blame the woman for his sin (Genesis 3:12). Man had previously been selfless in his devotion to his beloved but after the fall it was every man for himself. Genesis 3:10 relates this, “I heard the sound... I was afraid... I was naked, so I hid myself.” From listening to Adam’s words one would not even know he had a wife. Yet Genesis 3:8 says “they heard” and “they hid.” Here at the fall is the beginning of self-centeredness. Here at the fall is the beginning of sinful self-preoccupation and self-interest and self-focus. Only when the Lord purges us completely of sin in glory will this sinful “self-love” be at last washed away replaced wholly by the love of Christ.

Finally, spiritual and physical death resulted from it. Not only did man die an immediate spiritual death, he was doomed to die physically. Death of all kinds is a result of the fall. We often say today “He died of old age.” This is a misnomer. We don’t die of old age. We die of sin. All men’s deaths emanate from Adam’s sin. Those who cling to Christ as their federal head glory in His victory over death in His resurrection and look to the time we all, the elect, will say with Him, “Death is swallowed up in victory. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!” (I Corinthians 15:54,57).
Chapter 6 - Of the Fall of Man, of Sin and of the Punishment Thereof

(6.3 The Imputation of Adam's Sin to the Rest of Humanity)

September 28

6.3 They being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed; and the same death in sin, and corrupted nature, conveyed to all their posterity descending from them by ordinary generation.

Rowland Ward's Translation

6.3 Adam and Eve being the ancestors of the whole human race, the guilt of this sin was imputed, and the same death in sin and corrupted nature was conveyed, to all those descending from them in the ordinary manner.

Commentary:

J.I. Packer says: “Scripture diagnoses sin as a universal deformity of human nature, found at every point in every person (1 Kings 8:46; Rom. 3:9-23; 7:18; 1 John 1:8-10). Both Testaments have names for it that display its ethical character as rebellion against God’s rule, missing the mark God set us to aim at, transgressing God’s law, disobeying God’s directives, offending God’s purity by defiling oneself, and incurring guilt before God the Judge. This moral deformity is dynamic: sin stands revealed as an energy of irrational, negative, and rebellious reaction to God’s call and command, a spirit of fighting God in order to play God. The root of sin is pride and enmity against God, the spirit seen in Adam’s first transgression; and sinful acts always have behind them thoughts, motives, and desires that one way or another express the willful opposition of the fallen heart to God’s claims on our lives.

Sin may be comprehensively defined as lack of conformity to the law of God in act, habit, attitude, outlook, disposition, motivation, and mode of existence. Scriptures that illustrate different aspects of sin include Jeremiah 17:9; Matthew 12:30-37; Mark 7:20-23; Romans 1:18–3:20; 7:7-25; 8:5-8; 14:23 (Luther said that Paul wrote Romans to “magnify sin”); Galatians 5:16-21; Ephesians 2:1-3; 4:17-19; Hebrews 3:12; James 2:10-11; 1 John 3:4; 5:17. Flesh in Paul usually means a human being driven by sinful desire; the NIV renders these instances of the word as “sinful nature.” The particular faults and vices (i.e., forms and expression of sin) that Scripture detects and denounces are too numerous to list here.

Original sin, meaning sin derived from our origin, is not a biblical phrase (Augustine coined it), but it is one that brings into fruitful focus the reality of sin in our spiritual system. The assertion of original sin means not that sin belongs to human nature as God made it (God made mankind upright, Eccles. 7:29), nor that sin is involved in the processes of reproduction and birth (the uncleanness connected with menstruation, semen, and childbirth in Leviticus 12 and 15 was typical and ceremonial only, not moral and real), but that (a) sinfulness marks everyone from birth, and is there in the form of a motivationally twisted heart, prior to any actual sins; (b) this inner sinfulness is the root and source of all actual sins; (c) it derives to us in a real though mysterious way from Adam, our first representative before God. The assertion of original sin makes the point that we are not sinners because we sin, but rather we sin because we are sinners, born with a nature enslaved to sin.

The phrase total depravity is commonly used to make explicit the implications of original sin. It signifies a corruption of our moral and spiritual nature that is total not in degree (for no one is as bad as he or she might be) but in extent. It declares that no part of us is untouched by sin, and therefore no action of ours is as good as it should be, and consequently nothing in us or about us ever appears meritorious in God’s eyes. We cannot earn God’s favor, no matter what we do; unless grace saves us, we are lost.

Total depravity entails total inability, that is, the state of not having it in oneself to respond to God and his Word in a sincere and wholehearted way (John 6:44; Rom. 8:7-8). Paul calls this unresponsiveness of the fallen heart a state of death (Eph. 2:1, 5; Col. 2:13), and the Westminster Confession says: “Man by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation; so as a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able by his own strength to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto” (IX. 3).”
Chapter 6 - Of the Fall of Man, of Sin and of the Punishment Thereof

(6.4 Original Sins and Our Sins)

September 29

6.4 From this original corruption, whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil, do proceed all actual transgressions.

Rowland Ward’s Translation

6.4 This original corruption makes us completely disinclined, incapacitated, and opposed to all spiritual good, and wholly inclined to all evil. The actual sins that we commit are the fruit of this corrupt nature.

ANALYSIS WCF 6:1-6

1. The entry of sin into the human family
2. The effects of sin for Adam and Eve
3. The effect of sin on their descendants
4. Sin and sins
5. Sin in believers
6. Sin’s nature and consequences

Commentary:

Ward says: “There is a biblical realism in this chapter and an absence of theorizing. The Confession does not deal with the origin of sin in God’s creation but the origin of sin in the human race. This is all that is important for us. What is commonly called ‘sin’ is by some held to be the remnants of an animal nature that clings to us despite our evolutionary progress, and for which we are not responsible. The alternative position and the Biblical one is that sin is an intrusion into the original good order of creation and that we are morally responsible to our Creator for it. This intrusion has an historic origin at the beginning of the race: Adam and Eve were not mythical people, but real people who disobeyed God.”

Of 6.2 he says: “The result of the first sin so far as Adam and Eve are concerned is now stated. To become ‘wholly defiled in all the faculties’ (1646 text) does not mean totally defiled in degree but in extent, ie. every part of man’s life was affected. The context is that of man’s relation with God, whose communion was lost, hence the Larger Catechism Q25 states man is ‘utterly disposed, disabled and made opposite to all that is spiritually good.’ It is not meant to assert the obvious untruth that they are as evil as possible, or that there was nothing of relative good left (see WCF 16:7). As W.G.T. Shedd put it: ‘Total depravity means the total absence of holiness not the highest intensity of sin.’ [Dogmatics, II, 257]”

Of 6.3 he says: “More strictly one would say Adam was the root of mankind and its representative head so that in Adam’s fall we all sinned. How we inherit sin may be stated thus: Adam’s sin brought guilt and corrupted his nature. We are represented by Adam therefore we are guilty; as an appropriate punishment we inherit Adam’s corruption. As a result of our corrupt natures we commit actual sins.”

Hodge says, of 6.4, “‘From this original corruption’ of nature ‘proceed all actual transgressions.’ It is here taught (1) That all men sin from the commencement of moral agency. (2) That back of this their nature is morally corrupt, indisposed to all good, and inclined to all evil. (3) That this moral corruption is so radical and invertebrate that men are by nature ‘disabled’ with respect to right moral action. (4) That this condition is innate from birth and by nature this representation agrees with universal experience. All the children of men, of all ages, nations, and circumstances, and how ever educated, invariably sin as soon as they become capable of moral action. A universal fact must have a cause universally present. This can only be found in the common depravity of our nature.”

All this boils down to the point: “we sin because we are sinners, by nature.” That is, we are not sinners because we commit sins, but we commit sins because we are sinners. That’s why only grace can save us. We are the problem. The solution must come from outside of us.
Chapter 6 - Of the Fall of Man, of Sin and of the Punishment Thereof

(6.5 Christians are forgiven, but still sin)

6.5 This corruption of nature, during this life, doth remain in those that are regenerated; and although it be, through Christ, pardoned, and mortified; yet both itself, and all the motions thereof, are truly and properly sin.

Rowland Ward’s Translation

6.5 During this earthly life this corruption of nature remains in those who are regenerated. Although, through Christ, the corruption is pardoned and put to death, both it and everything flowing from it is truly and actually sin.

Commentary:

Ward says: “Regeneration does not bring freedom from indwelling sin in this life. That believers are pardoned for Christ’s sake does not relieve sin of its sinfulness, which remains as heinous as ever. The exhortation to believers to ‘be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect’ (Matt 5:48 cf. 1 Peter 1:15-16) is to be recognised, but in this life it cannot be realized. At various times there have been those who have preached the possibility of perfection in this life, but they must redefine sin to as to allow a lower attainable standard. A famous advocate, the great John Wesley (1703-91), never claimed the experience himself. The state of perfection or ‘entire sanctification’ claimed by some seems to arise from confusing experiences of God’s love with sanctification. Sanctification is not an act, but a progressive work (cf. WCF 13).”

Shaw says: “This section teaches us, that corruption of nature remains in those that are regenerated, and is commensurate with this life. This condemns the tenet of Christian perfection; and it is supported by the plainest declarations of Scripture. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."—1 John i. 8. Paul himself says, "Sin dwelleth in me," and affirms, that "when he would do good, evil is present with him."—Rom. vii. 17-21. It has, indeed, been disputed, whether Paul, in that chapter, describes his own feelings, or personates another. We have no doubt that Paul speaks of himself as regenerated, and describes his own state, and consequently the state of every regenerated person; but we do not rest the doctrine upon this single passage, for the conflict there described is represented in other places in language which, by common consent, can only be applied to true Christians. We shall only refer to Gal. v. 17: "The flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other; so that ye cannot do the things that ye would."

This section also affirms that, even in the regenerated, this corruption, and all the motions thereof, are truly and properly sin. The guilt of it is, no doubt, removed by the blood of Christ, and the power of it subdued by his Spirit and grace; but, in itself, it retains the character of sin. This is affirmed in opposition to a tenet of the Church of Rome. That universal propensity to sin, which we call the corruption of nature, Roman Catholic writers denominate concupiscence; and this, they maintain, is no part of original sin, and is not in itself sinful. As they believe that original sin is taken away by baptism, and nevertheless find that this corrupt disposition remains in the regenerated, they conclude that it is no part of original sin, but that it is the natural state in which Adam was made at first; only, that in us it is without the restraint of supernatural assistance which was given to him, and which, in consequence of his transgression, was withdrawn from him and his posterity. In answer to this, it is argued that lust or concupiscence is, in several places of the New Testament, spoken of as sin; particularly in Rom. vii. 7, Paul declares that “he had not known sin but by the law;” he then gives an instance of this,—"he had not known lust, except the law said said, Thou shalt not covet." Here he expressly asserts that lust is sin.”

This truth is hugely important for the Christian life. We are always simultaneously forgiven and sinners. Sometimes we are told that since we are saved we should no longer think of ourselves as sinners, but rather as saints. While it is true that we are saints, by the grace of God, we are always (as Luther said) simul justus et peccator (at the same time righteous and a sinner).
Chapter 6 - Of the Fall of Man, of Sin and of the Punishment Thereof

October 1

(6.6 The Consequences of Original and Actual Sin)

6.6 Every sin, both original and actual, being a transgression of the righteous law of God, and contrary thereunto, doth, in its own nature, bring guilt upon the sinner, whereby he is bound over to the wrath of God, and curse of the law, and so made subject to death, with all miseries spiritual, temporal, and eternal.

Commentary:

This section is about what sin deserves. Shaw says: “This section relates to the desert of sin. Being a transgression of the law of God, it must, in its own nature, bring guilt upon the sinner, or render him liable to punishment. It exposes him to the wrath of God, for “the children of disobedience” are also “children of wrath,” i.e., they deserve and are obnoxious to the wrath of God. It subjects him to the curse of the law, by which we may understand the condemnatory sentence of the broken law, which binds over the guilty sinner to all the direful effects of the wrath of God. It likewise subjects him to death, or the dissolution of the mysterious union between the soul and the body. Pelagians and Socinians hold that death is not the punishment of sin—that Adam was mortal from the beginning; and for this reason, those who are born of him must also be mortal. Others, again, both in former and later times, have held that temporal death was the only penalty threatened to Adam, and that this is the only death which results from his sin. Both these opinions are so plainly contradictory to the express declarations of the Word of God, that they are unworthy of serious refutation. In addition to this, our Confession states, that sin exposes the sinner to numerous miseries, both in this life, and in that which is to come. Among the spiritual or inward miseries to which it renders the sinner liable in this world, the compilers of our Confession elsewhere mention “blindness of mind, a reprobate sense, strong delusions, hardness of heart, horror of conscience, and vile affections;” and among the temporal or outward miseries, they mention “the curse of God upon the creatures for our sakes, and all other evils that befall us in our bodies, names, relations, and employments.” And the miseries to which sin exposes in the world to come, they sum up in “everlasting separation from the comfortable presence of God, and most grievous torments in soul and body, without intermission, in hellfire for ever.”

When we reflect on the loss which Adam sustained by his fall, and on the guilty and corrupted state in which we are thereby involved, and on the manifold miseries to which we are liable, both here and hereafter, let us be deeply impressed with a sense of the dreadful malignity and demerit of sin, - the source of all our woe. Let us not dare to repine against God, or to impeach his goodness or equity, for permitting sin to enter into the world, and making us responsible for the transgression of the first Adam, but rather let us admire the divine wisdom and grace displayed in providing the second Adam, by whose obedience we may be made righteous, as by the disobedience of the first we were made sinners. Let us cordially receive the Lord Jesus Christ, that, being found in him, we may not only be acquitted from the guilt of the first man’s transgression, but may be brought, through “the abundance of grace, and of the gift of righteousness, to reign in life by one,” even by Jesus Christ, our Lord.”

Every sinner deserves the doom described in this section, but God in his sovereign grace spares believers what they deserve, because Christ bore what they deserved in their place. By the way, the claim has sometimes been made that believers, being justified are no longer guilty in God’s sight, therefore any guilt that they experience is said to be self-imposed or false guilt. The problem with this view is that it fails to take into account the distinction between ‘potential guilt’ and ‘actual guilt.’ In justification God declares a sinner righteous (He does not make him righteous), this remedies the ‘actual guilt’ of the believer. But the ‘potential guilt’ remains. So a believer should not expect his conscience to be guilt-free when he sins, for potential guilt still remains on that believer. Only in glorification, when God makes believers righteous, will believers be completely and eternally free from ‘potential guilt’ and then only because God has graciously removed sin from their lives.
Chapter 7 - Of God’s Covenant With Man

(7.1 By means of a covenant, God stooped to enter into a fellowship of blessing with humanity)

7.1 The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God’s part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.

Commentary:

Chapter 7 of the Confession introduces us to the rudiments of what is called “Covenant Theology.” Covenant theology is the Bible’s way of explaining and deepening our understanding of four things. First, the atonement – the meaning of the death of Christ. Second, assurance – the basis of our confidence of communion with God and enjoyment of his promises. Third, the sacraments – signs and seals of God’s covenant promises. Covenant theology explains what they are and how they work. Fourth, the continuity of redemptive history – the unified plan of God’s salvation. Covenant theology is also an hermeneutic, an approach to understanding the Scripture — an approach that attempts to biblically explain the unity of biblical revelation.

Covenant theology is central, not peripheral, to the biblical story. When Jesus wanted to explain the significance of his death to his disciples, he went to the doctrine of the covenants (see Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22, 1 Corinthians 11). When God wanted to assure Abraham of the certainty of his word of promise, he went to the covenant (Genesis 12, 15, and 17). When God wanted to set apart his people, ingrain his work in their minds, tangibly reveal himself in love and mercy, and confirm their future inheritance, he gave the covenant signs (Genesis 17, Exodus 12, 17, and 31, Matthew 28, Acts 2, Luke 22). When Luke wanted to show early Christians that Jesus’ life and ministry were the fulfillment of God’s ancient purposes for his chosen people, he went to the covenant of grace and quoted Zacharias’ prophecy which shows that believers in the very earliest days of ‘the Jesus movement’ understood Jesus and his messianic work as a fulfillment (not a ‘Plan B’) of God’s covenant with Abraham (Luke 1:72-73). When the Psalmist and the author of Hebrews wanted to show how God’s redemptive plan is ordered and on what basis it unfolds in history, they went to the covenants (see Psalm 78, 89, Hebrews 6-10).

WCF 7.1 announces a vitally important truth. Because of the infinite majesty of God, because he is incalculably greater than we are—though all his rational creatures owe him obedience, just because he is our Creator—none of us could have enjoyed him forever unless he took the initiative in his love and goodness and condescended to invite us into a fellowship, a communion, a personal friendship with us. In other words, though God made us to glorify and enjoy him, we are incapable of experiencing the fullness of our blessedness and joy in him, apart from his own voluntary, willing condescension, and kind, generous, good and loving initiative to enter into a special relation with us in which we can do that.

7.1 tells us that the means by which God did this was a covenant. A covenant is (our Children’s Catechism reminds us) “an agreement between two or more persons” or, as Palmer Robertson says: “a bond in blood sovereignly administered.” In the Bible, the term “covenant” is deployed in at least four ways. 1. Covenant, most precisely and specifically, refers to the way or means by which a promissory and obligatory relationship is secured (see Gen 15:18). 2. Covenant, by synecdoche (a figure of speech in which the part refers to the whole), thus refers to a special kind of secured relationship (see Josh 9-10, esp. 9:11). This is the way we most often think about the term, but in doing so, we must never forget the originating and specific meaning. 3. Covenant may also refer to the sign or rite which represents and confirms the secured relationship (Gen 17:10). 4. Covenant can refer to the written revelation that derives from a period of redemptive history, because the revelation is associated with a particular administration of the God’s covenant (see 2 Cor 3:14).

So, 7.1 says that God, of his own willing and free initiative, deigned to share his blessedness and rewards with us, and he did so by entering into a covenant with man in paradise.
Chapter 7 - Of God’s Covenant With Man

(7.2 The first covenant was conditioned upon Adam’s obedience)

7.2 The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.

Commentary:

Hodge says: “The analysis of a covenant always gives the following elements: (a) Its parties. (b) Its promise. (c) Its conditions. (d) Its penalty. As to its parties, our Standards teach-

1. In the first covenant that concerned mankind God dealt with Adam as the representative of all his descendants. The parties, therefore, are God and Adam, the latter representing the human race. That Adam did so act as the representative of his descendants, in such a sense that they were equally interested with himself in all the merit or the demerit, the reward or the penalty, attaching to his action during the period of probation, has already been proved to be the doctrine both of our Standards and of Scripture. (Ch. 6., ss. 3, 4.) As to the further nature of this covenant, our Standards teach-The promise of it was life, the condition of it perfect obedience, and the penalty of it death. (L. Cat., q. 20; S. Cat., q. 12.)

This covenant is variously styled, from one or other of these several elements. Thus, it is called the “covenant of works,” because perfect obedience was its condition, and to distinguish it from the covenant of grace, which rests our salvation on a different basis altogether. It is also called the “covenant of life,” because life was promised on condition of the obedience. It is also called a “legal covenant,” because it demanded the literal fulfillment of the claims of the moral law as the condition of God’s favor. This covenant was also in its essence a covenant of grace, in that it graciously promised life in the society of God as the freely-granted reward of an obedience already unconditionally due. Nevertheless it was a covenant of works and of law with respect to its demands and conditions.

(1) That the promise of the covenant was life is proved-(a) From the nature of the penalty, which is recorded in terms. If disobedience was linked to death, obedience must have been linked to life. (b) It is taught expressly in many passages of Scripture. Paul says, Rom. 10:5, “Moses describes the righteousness which is of the law, That the man which does those things shall live by them.” (Matt. 19:16,17; Gal. 3:12; Lev. 18:5; Neh. 9:29.)

That the life promised was not mere continuance of existence is plain-(a) From the fact that the death threatened was not the mere extinction of existence. Adam experienced that death the very day he ate the forbidden fruit. The death threatened was exclusion from the communion of God. The life promised, therefore, must consist in the divine fellowship and the excellence and happiness thence resulting. (b) From the fact that mere existence was not in jeopardy. It is the character, not the fact, of continued existence which God suspended upon obedience. (c) Because the terms “life” and “death” are used in the Scriptures constantly to define two opposite spiritual conditions, which depend upon the relation of the soul to God. (John 5:24; 6:4; Rom. 6:23; 11:15; Eph. 2:1-3; 5:14; Rev. 3:1.)

That the condition of the covenant was perfect obedience is plain from the fact-(a) That the divine law can demand no less. It is of the essence of all that is right that it is obligatory. James says, that "whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all." James 2:10; Gal. 3:10; Deut. 27:26. (b) That the command not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, relating to a thing indifferent in itself, was plainly designed to be a naked test of obedience, absolute and without limit.

(3) That the penalty of this covenant was death is distinctly stated: "In the day thou eatest thereof, dying thou shalt die." Gen. 3:17. This denoted a most lamentable state of existence, physical and moral, and not the cessation of existence or the dissolution of the union between soul and body, because-(a) It took effect in our first parents hundreds of years before the dissolution of that union. (b) Because the Scriptures constantly describe the moral and spiritual condition into which their descendants are born, and from which they are delivered by Christ, as a state of death. (Rev. 3:1; Eph. 2:1-5; 5:14; John 5:24.)"
Chapter 7 - Of God's Covenant With Man

(7.3 When Adam failed, God established a redemptive covenant of grace)

7.3 Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein he freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life his Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe.

Commentary:

Hoge says: "The doctrine of our Standards and of Scripture may be stated in the following propositions:

1. At the basis of human redemption there is an eternal covenant or personal counsel between the Father, representing the entire Godhead, and the Son, who is to assume in the fullness of time a human element into his person, and to represent all his elect as their Mediator and Surety. The Scriptures make it very plain that the Father and the Son had a definite understanding (a) as to who were to be saved, (b) as to what Christ must do in order to save them, (c) as to how their personal salvation was to be accomplished, (d) as to all the blessings and advantages involved in their salvation, and (e) as to certain official rewards which were to accrue to the Mediator in consequence of his obedience.

   (1) The Scriptures expressly declare that the Father has promised the Mediator the salvation of his seed on condition of "the travail of his soul." (Isa. 53:10,11; 13:6,7; Ps. 89:3, 4.)

   (2) Christ makes constant reference to a previous commission he had received of his Father (John 10:18; Luke 22:29), and claims a reward conditioned upon the fulfillment of that commission. (John 17:4, 5.)

   (3) Christ as Mediator constantly asserts that his people and his expected glory are given him as a reward by his Father. (John 17:2,24.)

2. The promise of this covenant was-(1) All needful preparation of Christ for his work. (Heb. 10:5; Isa. 13:1-7.) (2) Support in his work. (Luke 22:43.) (3) A glorious reward (a) In his own Theanthropic person as Mediator. (John 5:22; Ps. 110:1.) (b) In committing to his hand the universal administration of all the precious graces and blessings of the covenant. (Matt. 28:18; John 1:12; 7:39; 17:2; Acts 2:33.) (c) In the salvation of the elect, including all general and special provisions of grace, such as regeneration, justification, sanctification, perseverance, and glory. (Titus 3:5,6; Jer. 31:33; 32:40; Isa. 35:10; 53:10,11.)

3. The condition of this covenant was-(1) That he should be born of a woman, made under the law. (Gal. 4:4,5.) (2) That he should assume and discharge, in behalf of his elect, all the broken conditions and incurred liabilities of the covenant of works (Matt. 5:17,18).-(a) rendering that perfect obedience which is the condition of the promise of the old covenant (Ps. 40:8; Isa. 13:21; John 8:29; 9:4,5; Matt. 19:17), and (b) suffering the penalty of death incurred by the breaking of the old covenant, (Isa. 53; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:13; Eph. 5:2.)

4. Christ, as mediatorial King, administers to his people the benefits of his covenant; and by his providence, his Word, and his Spirit, he causes them to become severally recipients of these blessings, according to his will. These benefits he offers to all men in the gospel. He promises to grant them on the condition they are received. In the case of his own people, he works faith in them, and as their Surety engages for them and makes good all that is suspended upon or conveyed through their agency."
7.4 This covenant of grace is frequently set forth in Scripture by the name of a testament, in reference to the death of Jesus Christ the Testator, and to the everlasting inheritance, with all things belonging to it, therein bequeathed.

Rowland Ward’s translation

7.4 This covenant of grace is frequently described in Scripture as inaugurated by the death of Jesus Christ, and as securing an everlasting inheritance for all believers.

Commentary:

Ward says: “... only in Hebrews 9:16, 17 is the Greek word διαθήκη (covenant) likely to have the meaning ‘testament’ and even here there is doubt. The rewording expresses what is clearly supported by the original texts of Scripture cited. Either way, the doctrinal point remains valid: Christ’s work is testamentary since our salvation is through his death, and what we receive from him is the inheritance of the children of God that was forfeited by Adam.”

Hodge says: “The present administration of this covenant by Christ, in one aspect, evidently bears a near analogy to a testament or will executed only consequent upon the death of the testator. And so in one passage our translators were correct in so translating the word διαθήκη. (Heb. 9:16, 17.) But since Christ is an ever-living and constantly-acting Mediator, the same yesterday, today, and forever, this word, which expresses his present administration, should in every other instance have been translated “dispensation,” instead of “testament.” (2 Cor. 3:6, 14; Gal. 3:15; Heb. 7:22, 12:24; 13:20.)”

Shaw says: “In the authorised English version of the New Testament, the covenant of grace is frequently designated a testament; and it is generally admitted, that the original word signifies both a covenant and a testament. There is, at least, one passage in which it is most properly rendered testament, namely, Heb. ix. 16, 17. Some learned critics, indeed, have strenuously contended against the use of that term even in this passage; but the great majority allow that the common translation is unexceptionable.”

By way of review and overview, here is Rowland Wards’s outline of WCF 7.

Rowland Ward’s ANALYSIS WCF 7:1-6
1. The general necessity of God’s dealing by covenant
2. Its first expression
3. Its second expression
4. Its testamentary/inheritance aspect
5-6. Its administration in the OT and the NT

Ward also summarizes Herman Bavinck—without covenant no religion in the sense of fellowship with God, is possible. True fellowship with God can exist only because God is both infinitely great and condescendingly good. In his goodness God gives rights to his creatures. The covenant of works and the covenant of grace do not differ in their final goal but only in the way that leads to it. True religion must take the form of covenant in which love is not coerced but humans serve God willingly, moved by love to love in return. His the gift, ours the gratitude. Adam lived in the state of one who was changeably good. He had a positive obligation to God’s law written on his heart from the beginning. The negative probationary command provided a test of his attitude to God to the moral law—either God’s word or man’s insight. The image of God is ultimately only adequately realized in a humanity counting billions of members summed up in one head, spread over the earth. Humanity as prophet proclaiming the truth of God, as priest dedicating itself to God, as ruler controlling the earth and the whole of creation—that is the fully finished image of God, in New Testament terms the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit.
(7.5 The covenant of grace was administered differently under the law and under the gospel)

7.5 This covenant was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel: under the law, it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foresignifying Christ to come; which were, for that time, sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation; and is called the Old Testament.

Commentary:

Hodge says: "These sections (7.5 and 6) teach us concerning the covenant of grace as it has been manifest in both the old and new dispensations.

1. The Covenant administered has from the beginning remained in all essential respects the same, in spite of all outward changes in its mode and administration. (1) Christ was the Savior of men before his advent, and he saved them on the same principles then as now. He was "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world," (Rev. 13:8); "a propitiation for the sins that are past," (Rom. 3:25; Heb. 9:15). He was promised to Adam and to Abraham as the Savior of the world. (Gen. 3:15; 17:7; 22:18. He was symbolically exhibited and typically prophesied by all the ceremonial and especially by the sacrificial system of the temple. (Col. 2:17; Heb. 10:1-10.) He was especially witnessed to as the Savior from sin by all the prophets. (Acts 10:43.) (2) Faith was the condition of salvation under the old dispensation in the same sense it is now. (Heb. 2:4; Ps. 2:12.) The Old Testament believers are set up for an example to those who are called to exercise faith under the New Testament. (Rom. 4; Heb. 11:) (3) The same gracious promises of spiritual grace and eternal blessedness were administered then as now. (Compare Gen. 17:7 with Matt. 22:32; and Gen. 22:18 with Gal. 3:16. See, also, Isa. 43:25; Ps. 16; 51; 73:24-26; Ezek. 36:27; Job 19:25-27; Dan. 12:2,3.)

2. Under the old dispensation the covenant of grace was administered chiefly by types and symbolic ordinances, signifying beforehand the coming of Christ, and thus administration was almost exclusively confined to the Jewish nation with constantly increasing fullness and clearness- (1) From Adam to Abraham, in the promise to the woman (Gen. 3:15); the institution of bloody sacrifices; and the constant visible appearance and audible converse of Jehovah with his people. (2) From Abraham to Moses, the more definite promise given to Abraham (Gen. 17:7; 22:18), in the Church separated from the world, embraced in a special covenant, and sealed with the sacrament of Circumcision. (3) From Moses to Christ, the simple primitive rite of sacrifice developed into the elaborate ceremonial and significant symbolism of the temple service, the covenant enriched with new promises, the Church separated from the world by new barriers, and sealed with the additional sacrament of the Passover."

Ward says: "The gracious character of the Old Testament must not be denied by appeal to the Mosaic administration which came later (cf. Galatians 3). Indeed, the character of the Mosaic economy was one in which grateful and obedient response to the covenant Lord was the ethic, and not legalism or self-righteousness. The Exodus deliverance came before the law at Sinai (cf. Ex 19:4; 20:2). When the apostle John reminds us that 'the law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realised through Jesus Christ' (John 1:17), the contrast is not between two ways of salvation. Rather, the contrast is between the provisional prefiguring of the Old Testament through the Mosaic administration, and the reality that has come in Jesus Christ. The clear and full revelation now given means the ceremonies and sacrifices in which the Messiah was veiled and prefigured are no longer to be observed.
7.6 Under the gospel, when Christ, the substance, was exhibited, the ordinances in which this covenant is dispensed are the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper: which, though fewer in number, and administered with more simplicity, and less outward glory, yet, in them, it is held forth in more fullness, evidence and spiritual efficacy, to all nations, both Jews and Gentiles; and is called the New Testament. There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations.

Commentary:

Hodge says: “The present dispensation of the covenant is superior to the former one:—(1) Because while it was formerly administered by Moses, a servant, it is now administered visibly and immediately by Christ, a son in his own house. Heb. 3:5,6. (2) The truth was then partly hid, partly revealed, in the types and symbols; now it is revealed in clear history and didactic teaching. (3) That revelation has been vastly increased, as well as rendered more clear, by the incarnation of Christ and the mission of the Holy Ghost. (4) That dispensation was so encumbered with ceremonies as to be comparatively carnal; the present dispensation is spiritual. (5) That was confined to one people: the present dispensation, disembarrassed from all national organizations, embraces the whole earth. (6) That method of administration was preparatory: the present is final, as far as the present order of the world is concerned. It will give way only to that eternal administration of the covenant which shall be executed by the Lamb in the new heavens and the new earth, when there shall “be gathered together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth.” (Eph. 1:10.) More than this is not yet made known.”

On covenant theology and dispensationalism, Ward says: “There is a system of thought known as dispensationalism which arose in the 19th century. It is associated with the Scofield Reference Bible (1909), writers such as J.N. Darby, C.I. Scofield and L.S. Chafer, and institutions such as Dallas Theological Seminary. It seeks to reckon with the historic unfolding of God’s purposes, but tends to create periods which are not properly linked by the unifying factor of God’s grace. The dispensational scheme employs a radical literalism which leads to the view that God has separate and distinct purposes for Israel and the Church, the one earthly and the other heavenly. Israel in Scripture always means earthly Israel, it is claimed. Israel rejected the earthly Davidic kingdom offered her, and crucified her king. Consequently, the Lord, through the Apostles, introduced the Church age with a heavenly message for the Gentiles. This parenthesis will continue until God again renews the kingdom to ethnic Israel during an earthly millennium. Before that happens the Gospel must be preached to all the nations as a testimony, but a pessimism about both its reception and the faithfulness of the organised church is characteristic. A great tribulation will precede the millennium, but the church will be raptured away to heaven before it occurs.

On the other hand, covenant theology sees the choice of Israel as part of God’s preparation for the coming of Christ when salvation would be proclaimed among the nations. The kingdom of Israel was intended to provide an illustration of the kingdom of God inaugurated by Christ, just as surely as the sacrificial system provided types of Christ’s saving work. Old Testament promises about the future employed the images of the institutions of Israel without at all meaning to limit the fulfilment to a mere earthly reproduction of them. The notion that the Old Testament promises are fulfilled other than in and through the church as the expanded Israel of God is anathema. The unity of the church in every age is basic Rom 11. Literal interpretation means the intended meaning, not necessarily the surface meaning (cf. page 45). The shallow views of many evangelical Christians about the nature of the Old Testament dispensation need correction.”

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Chapter 8 - Of Christ the Mediator

(8.1 The Lord Jesus, God’s chosen and appointed Mediator)

8.1 It pleased God, in his eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus, his only begotten Son, to be the Mediator between God and man, the Prophet, Priest, and King, the Head and Savior of his church, the Heir of all things, and Judge of the world: unto whom he did from all eternity give a people, to be his seed, and to be by him in time redeemed, called, justified, sanctified, and glorified.

Rowland Ward’s translation

8.1 In his eternal purpose it pleased God to choose and appoint the Lord Jesus, his one and only Son, to be the mediator between God and man, the Prophet, Priest, and King, the Head and Saviour of his Church, the Heir of all things, and Judge of the world. From all eternity God gave him a people to be his seed, and to be in time by him redeemed, called, justified, sanctified, and glorified.

Rowland Ward’s ANALYSIS WCF 8:1-8

1. The appointed Mediator
2. The God-Man
3. The anointed Mediator
4. His work as Mediator
5. The atonement and its fruit
6. The atonement and those who lived before it
7. The relations of the natures in the Mediator
8. The application of redemption

Commentary:

In the eternal purposes of God, he chose (elected) and ordained (appointed) his only begotten Son, the Lord Jesus, to be the Mediator between God and humanity. So, in his capacity as Mediator, in accordance with the eternal decree, Christ is prophet, priest and king for his people. He is Head (ruler) and Savior (deliverer) of his church. He is the rightful heir of absolutely everything. He is also the Judge who will preside over the Great and Final Assize. Before time God give him his people, his church, to be his descendants and heirs, and to be bought back, called, forgiven and pardoned, transformed and purified, and glorified.

Ward says: “The head of the elect church is not the Son as Son, but the Son in his capacity as Mediator, thus the incarnate Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The office of Mediator embraces the functions of prophet (since we are ignorant), priest (since we are guilty) and king (since we are in bondage). To this office the Son was appointed by the Father. He was to make peace between God and man and was given power to ensure that peace was accomplished. His kingly office rests on his priestly office (cf. Phil 2:6-11) and includes all authority in heaven and on earth in order that he might bring to glory all those for whom he died”.

Hodge says: “Having already established the doctrine of God’s sovereign election and the doctrine of the covenant of grace between the Father and His Son, this section teaches that Christ as mediator is both God and man, exercising His authority as prophet, priest, and king. Moreover, He is Head and Savior of His Church, Heir of all things, and Judge of the world. 1. A mediator is one who intervenes between contesting parties for the sake of making reconciliation. The term is sometimes applied to independent and disinterested parties called in to arbitrate a difficulty; sometimes to a dependent messenger or agent of one of the parties to the contest employed to carry overtures to the other party. In this sense Moses was a mediator between God and the people of Israel. (Deut. 5:5; Gal. 3:19.) Sometimes it is applied to an intercessor employed by the weaker party to influence the stronger. The Scriptures apply the term, in a higher sense than any of these, to Christ. They teach that he intervenes between God and man, not merely to sue for peace and to persuade to it, but, armed with plenipotentiary power, efficiently to make peace and to do all that is necessary to that end.”
8.2 The Mediator is fully God and fully Man

The Son of God, the second person in the Trinity, being very and eternal God, of one substance and equal with the Father, did, when the fullness of time was come, take upon him man's nature, with all the essential properties, and common infirmities thereof, yet without sin; being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost, in the womb of the virgin Mary, of her substance. So that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion. Which person is very God, and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man.

Commentary:

Ward says: “In this section we consider more particularly the constitution of the person who is Mediator. The Mediator could not be God simply, but nor could he be man simply. Man has sinned and cannot meet his obligations. God is the one sinned against and he cannot ignore man’s guilt. Hence, God himself is the way back to himself. The Son takes to his divine person a true human nature, a body and a soul like ours, but sin excepted. The human nature of Christ never had a separate personal existence. His humanity began to exist in the Virgin’s womb through the power of the Spirit, but his person existed from eternity. This union of natures in the one person is called the hypostatic union.”

The natures in the person of Christ

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<th>False views which deny that Jesus Christ is both God and man, but affirm he is only man, only God or neither God nor man, may be summarized as follows:</th>
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<td><strong>Docetism</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Ebionitism</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Arianism</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Eutychianism</strong></td>
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The mystery of the two natures in the one person remains a mystery, but it fits the Biblical evidence. He was not two persons, nor were the two natures mixed so as to form one new nature. His humanity did not become divine (then it would not be human and he could not act for us), nor did his deity take the limitations of humanity (then God would destroy himself). He did not cease to be what he was from eternity, God’s Son, when he became what he was not, the Son of Man. Compare the succinct statement of the Shorter Catechism Q21: The only Redeemer of God’s elect is the Lord Jesus Christ who, being the eternal Son of God, became man and so was and continues to be both God and man in two distinct natures and one person for ever.
Chapter 8 - Of Christ the Mediator

October 10

(8.3 The properties and necessity of Christ's human nature and the Father's appointment)

8.3 The Lord Jesus, in his human nature thus united to the divine, was sanctified, and anointed with the Holy Spirit, above measure, having in him all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge; in whom it pleased the Father that all fulness should dwell; to the end that, being holy, harmless, undefiled, and full of grace and truth, he might be thoroughly furnished to execute the office of a mediator, and surety. Which office he took not unto himself, but was thereunto called by his Father, who put all power and judgment into his hand, and gave him commandment to execute the same.

Rowland Ward's Translation:

8.3 His human nature thus united to the divine, the Lord Jesus was set apart and anointed with the Holy Spirit to an unlimited extent. He had in him all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, and in him it pleased the Father that all fulness should dwell. The Father's purpose was that Jesus, being holy, harmless, undefiled, and full of grace and truth, might be completely equipped to exercise the office of a mediator and guarantor. Jesus did not take this office on his own initiative, but was called to it by his Father, who put all power and judgment into his hand, and commanded him to exercise it.

Commentary:

Ward says: "The effect of the hypostatic union was to give the human nature of Jesus dignity and honour. The anointing by the Spirit and the commissioning of God the Father, rendered him completely fit to be Mediator. This receiving of authority and power from the Father accounts for passages in Scripture which place Jesus in a subordinate relationship to the Father (eg. 1 Cor 11:3; John 14:28). 'In essential being, the Son is the equal of the Father; in relation to his official work, the Son takes on him the form of a servant...It is as Mediator, as manifested to us in the incarnation, that he subordinates himself to his Father’s will, in order that the Father, by the execution of that will, may secure our salvation.’ (John Macpherson)"

Hodge comments: "1. The effect of this hypostatical union upon the human nature of Christ was not to deify it, since, as we saw above, the human nature as well as the divine nature remains pure, separate, and unchanged, after as before. But the effect of this union was—
(1) To exalt the human nature of Christ to a degree of dignity and honor greatly beyond that attained by any other creature. (2) To fill it with a perfection of intellectual and moral excellence beyond that of any other creature. The Father gave not the Spirit by measure unto him. (John 3:34.) "It pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell." (Col. 1: 19.) His person, therefore, possessed all the properties belonging to absolute divinity, and an all-perfect and incomparably exalted manhood, and was thoroughly furnished to execute the office of Mediator and Surety.

2. Hence Christ was Mediator, and discharged all the functions of that office, not as God, nor as man, but as God-man. As this point is more directly called up by the seventh section of this chapter, it will be considered in that place.

Shaw observes: “This section relates to the qualification of Christ for his mediatory work. The Father, who called him to this work, furnished him with all requisite qualifications for its performance. Not only did he "prepare a body for him," that he might be capable of suffering and dying; he also conferred upon his human nature the gifts and graces of the Holy Spirit in an immeasurable degree, that he might be thoroughly furnished to execute his mediatorial office. "God giveth not the Spirit by measure unto him." —John iii. 34. In his miraculous conception, his human nature was formed by the Holy Spirit with initial grace in its highest degree of perfection; and when about to enter upon his public ministry in our nature, to seal his commission, and to qualify him in that nature for his work, the Spirit descended upon him in a bodily shape.—Luke iii. 21, 22.”
Chapter 8 - Of Christ the Mediator

October 11

(8.4 The voluntary, vicarious and perfect obedience of the Messiah)

8.4. This office the Lord Jesus did most willingly undertake; which that he might discharge, he was made under the law, and did perfectly fulfil it; endured most grievous torments immediately in his soul, and most painful sufferings in his body; was crucified, and died, was buried, and remained under the power of death, yet saw no corruption. On the third day he arose from the dead, with the same body in which he suffered, with which also he ascended into heaven, and there sitteth at the right hand of his Father, making intercession, and shall return, to judge men and angels, at the end of the world.

Commentary:
Ward says: “Christ’s work was entirely voluntary. See the quotation at the end of this chapter. Further, his work was active and passive - that is, it was a course of obedience which involved suffering. Note that the suffering of Christ in his death was not something merely done to him in which he was inactive — that is not what passive means in this context - but it was something he did in loving obedience: he was active in his death, as a priest offering himself to God. Finally, the Mediator did his work in a state of humiliation and in a state of exaltation, in both states his glory as Mediator being evident. His resurrection with ‘the same body’ does not mean there were not different qualities, cf. WCF 32:2-3.”

Hodge comments: “3. That Christ was appointed to this office by the Father, and acts in it upon an authority derived from the Father, is very prominently as well as clearly set forth in Scripture: “And no man takes this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron. So also Christ glorified not himself to be made an high priest; but . . . he was called of God an high priest after the order of Melchizedek.” (Heb. 5:4-10.) Christ constantly affirms that he was “sent by the Father”; that the Father had given him “a commandment”; that the “works” which he performed and the “words” which he spoke were not his, but the Father’s that sent him. “I can of mine own self do nothing: as I hear I judge: and my judgment is just; because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me.” (John 5:30.) “Jesus answered them and said, My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me.” (John 7:16.) “If ye loved me, ye would rejoice, because I said, I go unto the Father; for my Father is greater than I.” (John 14:24,28,31; 10:18; 12:49; 4:34.)

“The Eternal Word is of the same identical substance with and equal to the Father in power and glory. But the God-man, in his official relations and works, is officially, and as far as concerns these relations and actions alone, inferior to the Father-sent by his authority, acting for him, returning and accounting to him.

“4. That nevertheless Christ took this office and all it involved upon himself voluntarily is very evident-(1) Because otherwise, being absolute God, it could never have been imposed upon him. (2) Because otherwise his obedience and suffering could not have vicariously availed for us. (3) Because otherwise the execution of the law upon him would have been outrageously unjust. (4) Because it is expressly declared. Speaking of his life, he said, “No man takes it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down and I have power to take it again.” (John 10:18.) The motive which impelled him to the self-sacrificing undertaking was a personal love for his people "which passes knowledge.” (Gal. 2:20; Eph. 3:19; 5:2.)

“5. Christ discharged the functions of the mediatorial office in his estate of humiliation, which consists- (1) In his being born, and that in a low condition. (2) In his being made under the law, and rendering perfect obedience to it. (3) His undergoing the miseries of this life, the wrath of God, and the cursed death of the cross. And (4) In his being buried, and continuing under the power of death for a time. 6. He executed the functions of his mediatorial office also in his estate of exaltation, which consisted-In his rising from the dead on the third day. (2) In his ascending up into heaven. (3) In his sitting at the right hand of God the Father, where he intercedes for, and reigns over all things in the behalf of, his people. (4) In his coming to judge the world at the last day. This will be discussed in its proper place, under chapter 33.
Chapter 8 - Of Christ the Mediator

(8.5 The Perfect Obedience and Sacrifice of the Mediator, and their results)

8.5. The Lord Jesus, by his perfect obedience, and sacrifice of himself, which he, through the eternal Spirit, once offered up unto God, hath fully satisfied the justice of his Father; and purchased, not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven, for all those whom the Father hath given unto him.

Commentary:

J.I. Packer eloquently says: "Atonement means making amends, blotting out the offense, and giving satisfaction for wrong done; thus reconciling to oneself the alienated other and restoring the disrupted relationship."

"Scripture depicts all human beings as needing to atone for their sins but lacking all power and resources for doing so. We have offended our holy Creator, whose nature it is to hate sin (Jer. 44:4; Hab. 1:13) and to punish it (Ps. 5:4-6; Rom. 1:18; 2:5-9). No acceptance by, or fellowship with, such a God can be expected unless atonement is made, and since there is sin in even our best actions, anything we do in hopes of making amends can only increase our guilt or worsen our situation. This makes it ruinous folly to seek to establish one’s own righteousness before God (Job 15:14-16; Rom. 10:2-3); it simply cannot be done.

“But against this background of human hopelessness, Scripture sets forth the love, grace, mercy, pity, kindness, and compassion of God, the offended Creator, in himself providing the atonement that our sin has made necessary. This amazing grace is the focal center of New Testament faith, hope, worship, ethics, and spiritual life; from Matthew to Revelation it shines out with breathtaking glory.

“When God brought Israel out of Egypt, he set up as part of the covenant relationship a system of sacrifices that had at its heart the shedding and offering of the blood of unflawed animals “to make atonement for yourselves” (Lev. 17:11). These sacrifices were typical (that is, as types they pointed forward to something else). Though sins were in fact “left . . . unpunished” (Rom. 3:25) when sacrifices were faithfully offered, what actually blotted them out was not the animals’ blood (Heb. 10:11) but the blood of the antitype, the sinless Son of God, Jesus Christ, whose death on the cross atoned for all sins that were remitted before the event as well as sins committed after it (Rom. 3:25-26; 4:3-8; Heb. 9:11-15).

“New Testament references to the blood of Christ are regularly sacrificial (e.g., Rom. 3:25; 5:9; Eph. 1:7; Rev. 1:5). As a perfect sacrifice for sin (Rom. 8:3; Eph. 5:2; 1 Pet. 1:18-19), Christ’s death was our redemption (i.e., our rescue by ransom: the paying of a price that freed us from the jeopardy of guilt, enslavement to sin, and expectation of wrath; Rom. 3:24; Gal. 4:4-5; Col. 1:14). Christ’s death was God’s act of reconciling us to himself, overcoming his own hostility to us that our sins provoked (Rom. 5:10; 2 Cor. 5:18-19; Col. 1:20-22). The Cross propitiated God (i.e., quenched his wrath against us by expiating our sins and so removing them from his sight). Key texts here are Romans 3:25; Hebrews 2:17; 1 John 2:2 and 4:10, in each of which the Greek expresses propitiation explicitly. The cross had this propitiatory effect because in his suffering Christ assumed our identity, as it were, and endured the retributive judgment due to us (“the curse of the law,” Gal. 3:13) as our substitute, in our place, with the damning record of our transgressions nailed by God to his cross as the tally of crimes for which he was now dying (Col. 2:14; cf. Matt. 27:37; Isa. 53:4-6; Luke 22:37).

“Christ’s atoning death ratified the inauguration of the new covenant, in which access to God under all circumstances is guaranteed by Christ’s one sacrifice that covers all transgressions (Matt. 26:27-28; 1 Cor. 11:25; Heb. 9:15; 10:12-18). Those who through faith in Christ have “received reconciliation” (Rom. 5:11) “in him . . . become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). In other words, they are justified and receive the status of adopted children in God’s family (Gal. 4:5). Thereafter they live under the motivating constraint and control of the love of Christ for them as made known and measured by the cross (2 Cor. 5:14).”
Chapter 8 - Of Christ the Mediator

October 13

8.6 Although the work of redemption was not actually wrought by Christ till after his incarnation, yet the virtue, efficacy, and benefits thereof were communicated unto the elect, in all ages successively from the beginning of the world, in and by those promises, types, and sacrifices, wherein he was revealed, and signified to be the seed of the woman which should bruise the serpent’s head; and the Lamb slain from the beginning of the world; being yesterday and today the same, and forever.

Rowland Ward’s Translation:

8.6 Although the work of redemption was not actually accomplished by Christ until after his incarnation, yet its inherent value, operative power and benefits were given to the elect in all ages from the beginning of the world. Through promises, types and sacrifices, Christ was revealed and shown to be the seed of the woman who should bruise the serpent’s head, and the Lamb slain from the beginning of the world. He is the same yesterday, today and for ever.

Commentary:

Rowland Ward says (of 8.5): “It is popular to deride explanations of the atonement as mere theories. While we will do well to recognise the aspects of truth in some other views, the heart of Christ’s work is that of satisfaction in the sinner’s place, that is, penal substitution. This is held by Roman, Greek and orthodox Protestant Christianity. The effect of Christ’s mediatorial work is to make a perfect satisfaction to God’s justice, and to secure an everlasting inheritance for believers. The atonement is to be understood in the context of Christ as mediator of the covenant and thus is made for those who are represented by Christ and bound up with him. This is not a mechanical or commercial transaction.

“However, a very general view is that the atonement of Christ does not secure salvation but rather access to salvation if we choose it by our ‘free will’. In other words, it is held that Christ died for all people but only those who believe will be saved. Human free will operates to limit the effects of the atonement. Now while there is a sense in which it may be said that Christ died for ‘all men’ or for ‘the world’, the context of Scripture passages to this effect generally shows that the universalism meant is set in contrast to the single nation of the Jews or to a particular class of mankind. In such cases the meaning is that Christ died for people of every class from all the nations, and that a great multitude will be saved. In this way such passages are seen as entirely consistent with other passages which emphasise particular redemption and deny man the power to originate faith. On human freedom see WCF 12.”

Of 8.6 he says: “The question of the redemption of those who lived before the incarnation of Christ is answered in this section (see also WCF 7:5). Jesus tells us that Abraham rejoiced to see Christ’s day and he saw it and was glad (John 8:56). The phrase ‘the foundation of the world’ linked with ‘the Lamb slain’ in Rev 13:8 indicates that the death of Christ was a redemptive sacrifice decreed in the counsels of eternity.”

Robert Shaw says: “This section asserts the efficacy of the death of Christ for the salvation of sinners before, as well as since, he actually laid down his life. Though four thousand years elapsed before he actually appeared in the flesh, and put away sin by the sacrifice of himself, yet he was exhibited from the beginning of the world, in promises, predictions, and types; and believers under the Old Testament were saved by the merit of his sacrifice, as well as those under the New. Abraham “rejoiced to see his day,” and was justified by faith in him. “His death is not more efficacious now, nor will be to eternity, than it was before; for he is the same in point of virtue yesterday, in the ages past, as he is today, at present, and will be in the ages to come.”—Heb. xiii. 8. Let us rejoice that his death still possesses the same virtue and efficacy that ever it had; nothing more is required but the application of faith for the communication to us of its fruits and effects.”
8.7 Christ, in the work of mediation, acts according to both natures, by each nature doing that which is proper to itself; yet, by reason of the unity of the person, that which is proper to one nature is sometimes in Scripture attributed to the person denominated by the other nature.

Commentary:

Rowland Ward says: “Christ’s divine person renders his obedience and sufferings in our nature of infinite worth and value. All the acts of Christ are acts of the divine person. Each nature contributes what is proper to the mediatorial work Christ undertakes without becoming mixed or confounded with the other nature (see 8.2). Because of the unity of both natures in the one person what is proper to either nature belongs to the person, and Scripture sometimes applies names appropriate to the natures to the person. For example, it is said that the Son of Man came from heaven (John 3:13) or that God purchased the church ‘with his own blood’ (Acts 20:28; perhaps more correctly, ‘the blood of his own one’), or that God laid down his life for us (1 John 3:16 KJV), or that the Lord of Glory was crucified (1 Cor 2:8).”

J.I. Packer adds: “Jesus was a man who convinced those closest to him that he was also God; his humanness is not therefore in doubt. John’s condemnation of those who denied that “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” (1 John 4:2-3; 2 John 7) was aimed at Docetists, who replaced the Incarnation with the idea that Jesus was a supernatural visitant (not God) who seemed human but was really a kind of phantom, a teacher who did not really die for sins.

“The Gospels show Jesus experiencing human limitations (hunger, Matt. 4:2; weariness, John 4:6; ignorance of fact, Luke 8:45-47) and human pain (weeping at Lazarus’ grave, John 11:35, 38; agonizing in Gethsemane, Mark 14:32-42; cf. Luke 12:50; Hebrews 5:7-10; and suffering on the cross). Hebrews stresses that had he not thus experienced human pressures—weakness, temptation, pain—he would not be qualified to help us as we go through these things (Heb. 2:17-18; 4:15-16; 5:2, 7-9). As it is, his human experience is such as to guarantee that in every moment of demand and pressure in our relationship and walk with God we may go to him, confident that in some sense he has been there before us and so is the helper we need.

“Christians, focusing on Jesus’ deity, have sometimes thought that it honors Jesus to minimize his humanness. The early heresy of Monophysitism (the idea that Jesus had only one nature) expressed this supposition, as do modern suggestions that he only pretended to be ignorant of facts (on the supposition that he always actualized his omniscience and therefore was aware of everything) and to be hungry and weary (on the supposition that his divinity supernaturally energized his humanity all the time, raising it above the demands of ordinary existence). But Incarnation means, rather, that the Son of God lived his divine-human life in and through his human mind and body at every point, maximizing his identification and empathy with those he had come to save, and drawing on divine resources to transcend human limits of knowledge and energy only when particular requirements of the Father’s will so dictated.

“The idea that Jesus’ two natures were like alternating electrical circuits, so that sometimes he acted in his humanity and sometimes in his divinity, is also mistaken. He did and endured everything, including his sufferings on the cross, in the unity of his divine-human person (i.e., as the Son of God who had taken to himself all human powers of acting, reacting, and experiencing, in their unfallen form). Saying this does not contradict divine impassibility, for impassibility means not that God never experiences distress but that what he experiences, distress included, is experienced at his own will and by his own foreordaining decision.”

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Chapter 8 - Of Christ the Mediator  

October 15

(8.8 All the benefits of Christ’s redemption belong to all and only those he has redeemed)

8.8 To all those for whom Christ hath purchased redemption, he doth certainly and effectually apply and communicate the same; making intercession for them, and revealing unto them, in and by the Word, the mysteries of salvation; effectually persuading them by his Spirit to believe and obey, and governing their hearts by his Word and Spirit; overcoming all their enemies by his almighty power and wisdom, in such manner, and ways, as are most consonant to his wonderful and unsearchable dispensation.

Commentary:

Ward says: “In 8:5 the satisfaction rendered by Christ was set forth. Here [8.8] the actual application of that satisfaction is described. The harmony in the work of redemption is thus brought out (see also WCF 3:6). Christ made satisfaction for those the Father gave to him, and Christ, through the Spirit, effectively applies this redemption to those for whom he died. Some aspects touched on in this section will be taken up in WCF 10 - God’s Effective Call.”

“J.I. Packer says: Definite redemption, sometimes called “particular redemption,” “effective atonement,” and “limited atonement,” is an historic Reformed doctrine about the intention of the triune God in the death of Jesus Christ. Without doubting the infinite worth of Christ’s sacrifice or the genuineness of God’s “whosoever will” invitation to all who hear the gospel (Rev. 22:17), the doctrine states that the death of Christ actually put away the sins of all God’s elect and ensured that they would be brought to faith through regeneration and kept in faith for glory, and that this is what it was intended to achieve. From this definiteness and effectiveness follows its limitedness: Christ did not die in this efficacious sense for everyone. The proof of that, as Scripture and experience unite to teach us, is that not all are saved.

“The only possible alternatives are (a) actual universalism, holding that Christ’s death guaranteed salvation for every member of the human race, past, present, and future, or (b) hypothetical universalism, holding that Christ’s death made salvation possible for everyone but actual only for those who add to it a response of faith and repentance that was not secured by it. The choices are, therefore, an atonement of unlimited efficacy but limited extent (Reformed particularism), one of unlimited extent but limited efficacy (hypothetical universalism), or one of unlimited efficacy and unlimited extent (actual universalism). Scripture must be the guide in choosing between these possibilities.

“Scripture speaks of God as having chosen for salvation a great number of our fallen race and having sent Christ into the world to save them (John 6:37-40; 10:27-29; 11:51-52; Rom. 8:28-39; Eph. 1:3-14; 1 Pet. 1:20). Christ is regularly said to have died for particular groups or persons, with the clear implication that his death secured their salvation (John 10:15-18, 27-29; Rom. 5:8-10; 8:32; Gal. 2:20, 3:13-14; 4:4-5; 1 John 4:9-10; Rev. 1:4-6; 5:9-10). Facing his passion, he prayed only for those the Father had given him, not for the “world” (i.e., the rest of mankind, John 17:9, 20). Is it conceivable that he would decline to pray for any whom he intended to die for? Definite redemption is the only one of the three views that harmonizes with this data.

“There is no inconsistency or incoherence in the teaching of the New Testament about, on the one hand, the offer of Christ in the gospel, which Christians are told to make known everywhere, and, on the other hand, the fact that Christ achieved a totally efficacious redemption for God’s elect on the cross. It is a certain truth that all who come to Christ in faith will find mercy (John 6:35, 47-51, 54-57; Rom. 1:16; 10:8-13). The elect hear Christ’s offer, and through hearing it are effectually called by the Holy Spirit. Both the invitation and the effectual calling flow from Christ’s sin-bearing death. Those who reject the offer of Christ do so of their own free will (i.e., because they choose to, Matt. 22:1-7; John 3:18), so that their final perishing is their own fault. Those who receive Christ learn to thank him for the cross as the centerpiece of God’s plan of sovereign saving grace.”
Chapter 9 - Of Free Will

(9.1 The kind of freedom humans possess: “natural, uncoerced, liberty” or “free agency”)

9.1 God hath endued the will of man with that natural liberty, that it is neither forced, nor, by any absolute necessity of nature, determined to good, or evil.

Commentary:

What kind of “free will” do humans have? The Confession says that we have the ability to do what we desire to do (“natural liberty, or what philosophers call the “liberty of contingency”).

Ward outlines chapter 9 this way:

1. Human freedom basics
2. Freedom in the state of innocence
3. Freedom in the state of sin
4. Freedom in the state of grace
5. Freedom in the state of glory

He goes on to say: “The Confession states that man has a natural liberty of will which prevents it being determined to good or evil by such causes or influences as would exclude deliberate choice and spontaneous agency. The freedom or bondage of the four possible states of man described in the following sections must be taken in the light of this foundational teaching. In short, the human will is a reality; it is not a delusion as if our will was compelled to choose a certain way by an inbuilt necessity over-riding desire and deliberate choice. Choice is made, it is made freely, and the agent is responsible.

“We must not set the sovereignty of God over against the freedom of man as if the former eliminates the latter so that man has no will of his own but is driven by God’s will or, on the other hand, as if belief in man’s freedom of necessity limits the sovereignty of God. The Bible does not envisage human freedom as freedom from all restrictions or a freedom to act autonomously, nor does it regard God’s sovereignty as a threat to man’s freedom, or vice versa. When, as is often the case, man wants to assert his freedom over against God, he is acting as a rebel enslaved by sin, not as a son who submits to his Father. For the Bible does not regard freedom in an abstract or philosophical way, nor as the opposite of submission, but it regards freedom as realised in submission to God (compare 2 Peter 2:18-19).

“We would do well in keeping very carefully to the Biblical emphasis on the nature of human freedom. A great deal of fruitless speculation and harmful teaching and division has arisen through failure to do so. Much popular thought in Christian circles builds on the idea of freedom as an ability to act autonomously as if man dictates to God who will be saved. This is common in those sections of the Roman church uninfluenced by Augustine (AD 354-430), but it is far more widespread than this. It arose in the 17th century in the form of Arminianism (named after Jacob Arminius) which asserts the freedom of man over against God’s sovereignty.

“Those who followed Arminius, perhaps going further than he did, were called Remonstrants. They raised five objections to the Biblical scheme of salvation which gave rise to five answers by the Synod of Dort (1618-19). These are commonly called the five points of Calvinism, although, of course Calvinism is much more than these five points. Arminianism was widely influential in English Methodism and undergirds much popular evangelicalism today. The general idea of the Arminian view is that the will is neutral so that free will is a power of choice that is not controlled by the moral nature of the chooser. However, Christ teaches that the nature of the fruit is determined by the nature of the tree on which it grows (Matthew 12:33-35). In a more refined form Arminianism admits that man needs God’s grace to repent and believe, but it is still held that this grace is granted to all with the ultimate decision for or against being in the hands of man because of his ‘free’ will. A current variant is Open Theism . . . ”
9.2 Man, in his state of innocency, had freedom, and power to will and to do that which was good and well pleasing to God; but yet, mutably, so that he might fall from it.

Commentary:

Ward says: "In the state of innocence before Adam’s disobedience, man had freedom for he was created in fellowship with God and ‘very good’. But this position had to be personally and freely accepted; his freedom had to be vindicated by personal choice of righteousness or sin - hence the test in Eden. But if there was the necessity for choice, there was no necessity for the actual choice made. There can be no explanation but the willful abuse of his freedom.”

J.I. Packer helpfully notes: “Clear thought about the fallen human condition requires a distinction between what for the past two centuries has been called free agency and what since the start of Christianity has been called free will. Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and others spoke of free will in two senses, the first trivial, the second important; but this was confusing, and it is better always to use free agency for their first sense.

“Free agency is a mark of human beings as such. All humans are free agents in the sense that they make their own decisions as to what they will do, choosing as they please in the light of their sense of right and wrong and the inclinations they feel. Thus they are moral agents, answerable to God and each other for their voluntary choices. So was Adam, both before and after he sinned; so are we now, and so are the glorified saints who are confirmed in grace in such a sense that they no longer have it in them to sin. Inability to sin will be one of the delights and glories of heaven, but it will not terminate anyone’s humanness; glorified saints will still make choices in accordance with their nature, and those choices will not be any the less the product of human free agency just because they will always be good and right.

“Free will, however, has been defined by Christian teachers from the second century on as the ability to choose all the moral options that a situation offers, and Augustine affirmed against Pelagius and most of the Greek Fathers that original sin has robbed us of free will in this sense. We have no natural ability to discern and choose God’s way because we have no natural inclination Godward; our hearts are in bondage to sin, and only the grace of regeneration can free us from that slavery. This, for substance, was what Paul taught in Romans 6:16-23; only the freed will (Paul says, the freed person) freely and heartily chooses righteousness. A permanent love of righteousness—that is, an inclination of heart to the way of living that pleases God—is one aspect of the freedom that Christ gives (John 8:34-36; Gal. 5:1, 13).

“It is worth observing that will is an abstraction. My will is not a part of me which I choose to move or not to move, like my hand or my foot; it is precisely me choosing to act and then going into action. The truth about free agency, and about Christ freeing sin’s slave from sin’s dominion, can be expressed more clearly if the word will is dropped and each person says: I am the morally responsible free agency; I am the slave of sin whom Christ must liberate; I am the fallen being who only have it in me to choose against God till God renews my heart.

In his famous book, Human Nature in Its Fourfold State, the famous Scottish Pastor and “Marrow Man,” Thomas Boston (1676—1732) tells us that the four states of human nature are: (a) Primitive Integrity; (b) Entire Depravity; (c) Begun Recovery; and (d) Consummate Glory. These four states, which are derived from the Scripture, correspond to the four states of man in relation to sin enumerated by Augustine of Hippo: (a) able to sin, able not to sin (posse peccare, posse non peccare); (b) not able not to sin (non posse non peccare); (c) able not to sin (posse non peccare); and (d) unable to sin (non posse peccare). The first state corresponds to the state of man in innocency, before the Fall; the second the state of the natural man after the Fall; the third the state of the regenerate man; and the fourth the glorified man.
9.3 Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation: so as, a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.

Commentary:
Continuing to think about the “fourfold state” - “It should be noted that in all four states, man is free to choose what to do or not to do according to his will. His will is free because it is not forced or compelled from without. However, his will is determined by his own moral inclinations. This means that while the glorified man will always choose to do good because his heart’s inclination is always to glorify God; the natural fallen man will always do what is evil (in God’s eyes), because his motives are never pure, and never to glorify God. Before the Fall, man was able to choose to do either good or evil, his heart, and so his inclination and disposition, being innocent and not tainted by sin. But Adam’s state was mutable and when Satan tempted Eve, and then through Eve, tempted him, he chose to sin against God by eating the forbidden fruit and so fell from the estate of innocency.”

Ward says of 9.3, “The fall meant that man enslaved himself by his free choice, consequently the term ‘free will’ is a misnomer in much popular usage. For man does not now live in submission to God, but is enslaved by sin. Certainly he still makes free and conscious choices (cf. 9:1), but his prior free act of will has brought him into subjection to evil. He chooses what he desires, but he does not desire God any more. He may do many decent and worthy things in the eyes of men, but he does not choose what is spiritually good. ‘Those who are in the flesh cannot please God’, Paul reminds us (Romans 8:8). Indeed, man claims ‘freedom’ to act independently of God, and this cherishing of autonomy is the expression of self-will and proud rebellion against his Creator. So this is not a freedom to boast about, but a freedom that is slavery. Hence Martin Luther (1483-1545) regarded his book, The Bondage of the Will, written in 1525 against Erasmus, as his most important, along with his Small Catechism, for in it the fundamental issue was addressed - the hollowness of man’s claim to freedom.

“The last part in the 1646 text reads: or prepare himself thereunto. This does not mean God does not prepare a person for conversion, nor does it mean that the use of the means of grace is beyond man’s power. Rather, it relates to the common idea of man co-operating with God to bring about conversion - something utterly impossible for the one dead in sin, but something man in his pride likes to suppose he contributes to his salvation.

“It should be clearly noted that the sinful enslavement of mankind through the fall is one for which we are fully responsible. The inability to do what God demands of us does not excuse us since our inability is self-inflicted. In other words, responsibility to obey God’s word does not now imply ability to obey. Second, if our inability is really recognised it produces urgency to find relief, not indifference, as would be the case if we believed we had ability. Third, no appeal to the secret will of God is legitimate if it is used to deny or undermine the reality and sincerity of God’s revealed proposals of mercy made to sinners in the Gospel.”
Chapter 9 - Of Free Will

(9.4 Converted Sinners - Free [again] to do good, but conflicted between good and evil desires)

9.4 When God converts a sinner, and translates him into the state of grace, he freeth him from his natural bondage under sin; and, by his grace alone, enables him freely to will and to do that which is spiritually good; yet so, as that by reason of his remaining corruption, he doth not perfectly, nor only, will that which is good, but doth also will that which is evil.

Other Confessional Statements

Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England: Art. 10 (Episcopal): "The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such, that he cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and good works, to faith, and calling upon God: wherefore we have no power to do good works pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ preventing us, that we may have a good will, and working with us when we have that good will."

Articles of Synod of Dort: chap. iii., Art. 3 (Reformed): "All men are conceived in sin, and born children of wrath, indisposed to all saving good, propense to evil, dead in sins and the slaves of sin; and without the grace of the regenerating Holy Spirit they are neither willing nor able to return to God, to correct their depraved nature, or to dispose themselves to the correction of it."

Formula of Concord: (Lutheran): "Therefore we believe that as it is impossible for a dead body to revive itself, or to communicate animal life to itself, in the same degree is it impossible for a man, spiritually dead by reason of sin, to recall spiritual life within himself." lb. p. 653: "We believe that neither the intellect, heart, nor will of the unregenerate man, is able of its own natural strength either to understand, believe, embrace, will, begin, perfect, perform, operate, or cooperate anything, in things divine and spiritual; but man is so far dead and corrupt in respect to good, that in the nature of man since the fall, and before regeneration, there is not even a scintilla of spiritual strength remaining whereby he can prepare himself for the grace of God, or apprehend that grace when offered, or is able in whole or in half, or in the least part, to apply or accommodate himself to that grace, or to confer or to act, or to operate or to co-operate anything for his own conversion."

Commentary:

Ward says: "It follows from man's bondage in sin that the application of salvation must be accomplished by God's grace - by the mighty working of God's power through the Holy Spirit (compare John 6:44,65). This is the context in which our understanding of the following chapters must be understood. Accordingly, effective calling of the elect will not be seen as an arbitrary procedure but as a gracious activity by which the salvation purchased by Christ becomes the possession of those sinners to whom it has pleased the Lord to grant salvation. Being thus brought into submission by the Holy Spirit in the day of his power, man's freedom is more than restored, since he has freedom in Christ, that is, freedom through the covenant of grace. He continues to make free and conscious choices but the miracle of regeneration has given him a new nature which enables the choice of what is good once more. Not left to himself but enabled to do and to will what is good by God's grace, he is on the way to glory, the perfection of grace. Although he remains imperfectly sanctified in this life, and so also chooses evil, a decisive break has been made at the entry to the Christian life, the life of freedom in Christ."

Hymn - And Can It Be

Long my imprisoned spirit lay, Fast bound in sin and nature's night; Thine eye diffused a quickening ray—I woke, the dungeon flamed with light; My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed Thee. My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed Thee. (Charles Wesley!)
Chapter 9 - Of Free Will

(9.5 Glorified Saints, unable to sin, perfectly and unchangeably enabled to do good)

9.5 The will of man is made perfectly and immutably free to good alone, in the state of glory only.

Commentary:

Ward says: “In this life the believer has freedom from the power of sin but not from its presence. Perfect freedom is only realized in glory when we are perfectly conformed to the image of Christ. Through grace sin has been freely excluded and it has no more place in our lives.” Ward quotes Augustine: “Surely, if no Christian will dare say this, ‘It is not of God that shows mercy but of man who wills’, lest he should openly contradict the Apostle, it follows that the true interpretation of the saying, ‘It is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy’ [Romans 9:16], is that the whole work belongs to God who both makes the will of man righteous, and thus prepares it for assistance, and assists it when it is prepared.” Augustine (354-430) in Enchiridion 32.

Shaw says: “The human will is not a distinct agent, but only a power of the rational soul. It is essential to a soul to have a moral disposition, good or bad, or a mixture of both; and, according to what is the prevailing moral disposition of the soul, must be the moral actings of the will. Hence there is a great difference in regard to the freedom of the will in the different states of man. In the state of innocence, the natural inclination of man’s will was only to good; but it was liable to change through the power of temptation, and therefore free to choose evil. In his natural corrupt state, man freely chooses evil, without any compulsion or constraint on his will, and he cannot do otherwise, being under the bondage of sin. In the state of grace, he has a free will partly to good and partly to evil. In this state there is a mixture of two opposite moral dispositions, and as sometimes the one, and sometimes the other, prevails, so the will sometimes chooses that which is good, and sometimes that which is evil. In the state of glory, the blessed freely choose what is good; and, being confirmed in a state of perfect holiness, they can only will what is good.

“The important truth laid down in the third section concerning man’s inability, in his fallen state, to will or do that which is spiritually good, claims some further notice. It has been opposed by various sects. The Pelagians maintained “that mankind are capable of repentance and amendment, and of arriving to the highest degrees of piety and virtue by the use of their natural faculties and powers.” The Semi-Pelagians, though they allowed that assisting grace is necessary to enable a man to continue in a course of religious duties, yet they held “that inward preventing grace was not necessary to form in the soul the first beginnings of true repentance and amendment; that every man was capable of producing these by the mere power of his natural faculties; as also of exercising faith in Christ, and forming the purposes of a holy and sincere obedience.” The Arminians, in words, ascribe the conversion of the sinner to the grace of God; yet they ultimately resolve it into the free-will of man. In opposition to these various forms of error, our Confession asserts that man, in his natural corrupt state, “has lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation,” and that “a natural man is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.” This may be confirmed,—1. By the representations given in Scripture of the natural condition of mankind sinners. They are said to be “dead in trespasses and sins;” to be not only blind, but “darkness” itself; to be “the servants of sin;” to be “enemies of God,” who are not, and cannot be, subject to his law. —Eph. ii. 1, v. 8; Rom. vi. 17; Col. i. 21; Rom. viii. 7. 2. The Scripture contains explicit declarations of man’s inability to exercise faith in Christ, or to do anything spiritually good. - John vi. 44, xv. 5. 3. God claims the conversion of sinners as his own work, which he promises to accomplish. —Ezek. xi. 19, 20, xxxvi. 26, 27; Jer. xxxi. 33. 4. The conversion of sinners is uniformly ascribed to the efficacy of divine grace. —Acts xvi. 14; 1 Thess. i. 6. 5. The conversion of the soul is described in Scripture by such figurative terms as imply that it is a divine work. It is called a creation, - Eph. ii. 10; a resurrection, - John v. 21; a new birth, —John i. 13. 6. If the sinner could convert himself, then he would have something of which he might boast—something which he had not received. - Cor. i. 29, 30, iv. 7. 7. The increase of Christians in faith and holiness is spoken of as the work of God; which must more strongly imply that the first beginnings of it is to be ascribed to him. - Phil. i. 6, ii. 13; Heb. xiii. 20, 21. We only add, that man’s incapacity of willing or doing that which is spiritually good, being a moral inability, is not inconsistent with his responsibility.
Chapter 10 - Of Effectual Calling

(10.1 The Effective Call of Grace)

10.1 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; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God, taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them a heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and, by his almighty power, determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ: yet so, as they come most freely, being made willing by his grace.

Commentary:
Rowland Ward says: “Man being enslaved to his sinful nature, salvation must be a work of divine power and grace, but God has not chosen to save all but only those who are his called or the elect - a multitude which no man can number. Those of God's elect who can be called through the outward means of the word are also called effectively through the inward ministry of the Spirit. The logical distinctions are that the mind is illuminated so that the truth can be truly seen, the heart is awakened to hate evil and love what is good, and the will is renewed so that a genuine and willing response is given to the call of Christ in the gospel. We make these distinctions in logic although we cannot separate them in experience.”

J.I. Packer says: “Effectual calling is a sixteenth-century English phrase that became the title of chapter X of the 1647 Westminster Confession. … What is being spoken of here is the many-sided reality of Christian conversion, involving illumination, regeneration, faith, and repentance. It is being analyzed as a sovereign work of God, ‘effectually’ (i.e., effectively) performed by the power of the Holy Spirit. The concept corresponds to Paul’s use of the verb call (meaning “bring to faith”) and called (meaning “converted”) in Romans 1:6; 8:28, 30; 9:24; 1 Corinthians 1:24, 26; 7:18, 21; Galatians 1:15; Ephesians 4:1, 4; and 2 Thessalonians 2:14, and contrasts with the idea of a merely external and ineffective invitation, as found in Matthew 22:14.

Original sin renders all human beings naturally dead (unresponsive) to God, but in effectual calling God quickens the dead. As the outward call of God to faith in Christ is communicated through the reading, preaching, and explaining of the contents of the Bible, the Holy Spirit enlightens and renews the heart of elect sinners so that they understand the gospel and embrace it as truth from God, and God in Christ becomes to them an object of desire and affection. Being now regenerate and able by the use of their freed will to choose God and the good, they turn away from their former pattern of living to receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and to start a new life with him.”

Here’s how Ward outlines this chapter:

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<thead>
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<th>ANALYSIS WCF 10:1-4</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Persons with reason who heed the call</td>
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<td>2. Passivity in regeneration underscored</td>
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<td>3. Infants and incapables who cannot answer the call</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Persons with reason who do not heed or who do not hear</td>
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Francis Turretin says: Effectual calling “is an act of the grace of God in Christ by which he calls men dead in sin and lost in Adam through the preaching of the gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit, to union with Christ and to the salvation obtained in him.” The Shorter Catechism reads: Q.31 What is effectual calling?

A. Effectual calling is the work of God’s Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel.
Chapter 10 - Of Effectual Calling

(10.2 The Effective Call is the work of God alone)

10.2 This effectual call is of God’s free and special grace alone, not from anything at all foreseen in man, who is altogether passive therein, until, being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it.

Commentary:

Ward says: “We distinguish between regeneration proper, which is a new birth or a new creation, and conversion. Regeneration is monergistic, that is, God is the only worker of it, and the one dead in sin is (naturally) utterly passive. But, illumined in the mind, awakened in the heart and conscience and renewed in the will, the subject of the effective call closes with Christ as he is freely offered in the gospel. This is what is strictly called conversion, and the person is active in this. To put it another way, repentance and faith are evidence of a prior renewal; they are evidences that the Spirit of God has quickened one who was formerly dead in trespasses and sins. There may be resistance on our part but that resistance is overcome to bring us ‘clothed and in our right mind’ to the feet of Christ. Grace is not just offered for man to choose but is actually bestowed so producing the will to believe and the belief itself.”

Shaw says: “There is an eternal call of the gospel, whereby all who hear it are called to the fellowship of Christ, and to receive a full salvation in him, without money and without price. - Isa. lv. 1. This call is not confined to the elect, nor restricted to those who are sensible of their sins, and feel their need of a saviour, or who possess some good qualifications to distinguish them from others, but it is addressed to mankind sinners as such, without distinction, and without exception. All who come under the general denomination of men, whatever be their character and state, have this call directed to them: “To you, O men, I call, and my voice is to the sons of men.” —Prov. viii. 4. “Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth”—sinners of every nation, of every rank, and condition.—Isa. xiv. 22. To reconcile the unlimited call of the gospel with the doctrines of particular election and a definite atonement, seems to exceed the efforts of the human mind. But though we cannot discover the principle which reconciles them, the doctrines themselves are clearly taught in the Word of God; and are, therefore, to be received with unhesitating confidence. That the call of the gospel is indefinite and universal, that God is sincere in addressing this call to all to whom the gospel comes, and that none who comply with the call shall be disappointed; these are unquestionable truths. But the outward call by the Word is of itself ineffectual. Though all without exception are thus called, yet multitudes refuse to hearken, and in this respect “many are called, but few are chosen,” that is, few are determined effectually to embrace the call.

But there is also an internal call, in which the Holy Spirit accompanies the external call with power and efficacy upon the soul; and this call is always effectual. This effectual work of the Spirit is termed a calling, because men are naturally at a distance from Christ, and are hereby brought into fellowship with him. They are called “out of that state of sin in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ”—out of darkness into marvelous light—out of the world that lies in wickedness into the family of God—from a state of bondage into a state of glorious liberty—from a state of sin unto holiness and from a state of wrath unto the hope of eternal glory.”

Wayne Grudem says: “We may define effective calling as follows: Effective calling is an act of God the Father, speaking through the human proclamation of the gospel, in which he summons people to himself in such a way that they respond in saving faith. It is important that we not give the impression that people will be saved by the power of this call apart from their own willing response to the gospel (personal faith and repentance are necessary for conversion). Although it is true that effective calling awakens and brings forth a response from us, we must always insist that this response still has to be a voluntary, willing response in which the individual person puts his or her trust in Christ.”
Chapter 10 - Of Effectual Calling

(10.3 Effectual Calling and the special case of infants and the incapable)

10.3 Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated, and saved by Christ, through the Spirit, who worketh when, and where, and how he pleaseth: so also are all other elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word.

Commentary:

Ward says: “The natural question to raise at this point is, ‘What about elect persons who cannot be outwardly called by the ministry of the word because they are infants or mentally incapable?’ Section 3 answers this by affirming that such persons are saved by Christ through the Spirit, just as are any other elect persons. In short, such persons, being members of a fallen race, need salvation, but they have it on the same basis as others. Ordinarily, persons show the fruit of regeneration in repentance, faith and evangelical obedience, whereas this fruit is not evident to us in the case of elect infants dying such or those mentally incompetent. However, regeneration may still occur, and issue in its fruit in glory.

“Since the confession is dealing with the way by which infants may be saved and not the number of such persons, the appropriateness of the term ‘elect infants’ is clear. This term implies the need of redemption for infants and thus safeguards against the notion that original sin is not of itself damming. Failure to recognise this orientation of this section of the Confession has led many to infer that there are some in the category of infants who are not elect. This is not a necessary inference and in fact the larger number of Calvinists have always held that the children of believers who die in infancy or in the womb are saved, and many have held that all infants dying such are saved.

“It is of interest that some editions of the Baptist Confession of 1689, ... remove the word elect qualifying infants in this section and so assert the regeneration of all children dying in infancy. The PCUSA did the same in 1903. Still the lack of a positive assertion to this effect is desirable. A plausible inference should not be bound on the conscience in a creed even though it be the common belief, nor should any suggestion that children do not need redemption be allowed a place. All who are saved are saved because they are elect.

“This section is important. It is certainly true that Calvinists have the only satisfactory basis for affirming the salvation of any infants or of any grown persons who have never had the power of reason. For those predicating salvation on participation in the sacraments cannot point the finger at the Confession, nor can those who predicate salvation on the possession of conscious faith. But salvation predicated on the electing love of the Father, the atonement of Christ and the regeneration of the Spirit finds no obstacle to the salvation of those who cannot be called by the outward ministry of the word. Hence, it is open to a subscriber to the Confession to believe all infants dying such are saved in this way, although he cannot assert it as the authoritative teaching of the church.

Hodge says: “If infants and others not capable of being called by the gospel are to be saved, they must be regenerated and sanctified immediately by God without the use of means. If God could create Adam holy without means, and if he can new-create believers in righteousness and true holiness by the use of means which a large part of men use without profit, he can certainly make infants and others regenerate without means. Indeed, the natural depravity of infants lies before moral action, in the judicial deprivation of the Holy Ghost. The evil is rectified at that stage, therefore, by the gracious restoration of the soul to its moral relation to the Spirit of God. The phrase "elect infants" is precise and fit for its purpose. It is not intended to suggest that there are any infants not elect, but simply to point out the facts -- (1.) That all infants are born under righteous condemnation; and (2.) That no infant has any claim in itself to salvation; and hence (3.) The salvation of each infant, precisely as the salvation of every adult, must have its absolute ground in the sovereign election of God. This would be just as true if all adults were elected, as it is now that only some adults are elected. It is, therefore, just as true, although we have good reason to believe that all infants are elected. The Confession adheres in this place accurately to the facts revealed. It is certainly revealed that none, either adult or infant, is saved except on the ground of a sovereign election; that is, all salvation for the human race is pure grace. It is not positively revealed that all infants are elect, but we are left, for many reasons, to indulge a highly probable hope that such is the fact. The Confession affirms what is certainly revealed, and leaves that which revelation has not decided to remain, without the suggestion of a positive opinion upon one side or the other.”
Chapter 10 - Of Effectual Calling

(10.4 Effectual Calling and the necessity of believing on Christ as he is offered in the Gospel)

10.4 Others, not elected, although they may be called by the ministry of the Word, and may have some common operations of the Spirit, yet they never truly come unto Christ, and therefore cannot be saved: much less can men, not professing the Christian religion, be saved in any other way whatsoever, be they never so diligent to frame their lives according to the light of nature, and the laws of that religion they do profess. And, to assert and maintain that they may, is very pernicious, and to be detested.

Commentary:

Hodge says: "This section, taken in connection with the parallel passage in L. Cat., q. 60, teaches the following propositions: --

1. That the non-elect will certainly fail of salvation, not because a free salvation is not made available to them if they accept Christ, but because they never accept Christ; and they all refuse to accept him, because, although they may be persuaded by some of the common influences of the Holy Ghost, their radical aversion to God is never overcome by effectual calling. It has already been proved under sections 1 and 2 that the grace of effectual calling extends to all the elect, and only to the elect; hence the truth of this proposition follows.

2. That the diligent profession and honest practice of neither natural religion, nor of any other religion than pure Christianity, can in the least avail to promote the salvation of the soul, is evident from the essential principles of the gospel. If any person perfectly conformed to the amount of spiritual truth known to him in every thought and act from birth upward, however little that knowledge might be, he would of course need no salvation. But all men, as we have seen, are born under condemnation, and begin to act as moral agents with natures already corrupt. "All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." Rom. iii. 23. Hence it follows that an atonement is absolutely necessary, and consequently a personal interest in the redemption of Christ is absolutely necessary to salvation; for if a law, conformity to which could have given life, could have been given, Christ is dead in vain. Gal. ii. 21; iii. 21. To admit that men may be saved irrespectively of Christ is virtually to deny Christ.

3. That in the case of sane adult persons a knowledge of Christ and a voluntary acceptance of him is essential in order to a personal interest in his salvation is proved --

(1.) Paul argues this point explicitly. If men call upon the Lord they shall be saved; but in order to call upon him, they must believe; and in order to believe, they must hear; and that they should hear, the gospel must be preached unto them. Thus the established order is -- salvation cometh by faith, faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God. Rom, x. 13 -- 17; Matt. xi. 27; John xiv. 6; xvii. 3; Acts iv. 12.

(2.) God has certainly revealed no purpose to save any except those who, hearing the gospel, obey; and he requires that his people, as custodians of the gospel, should be diligent in disseminating it as the appointed means of saving souls. Whatever lies beyond this circle of sanctified means is unrevealed, unpromised, uncovenanted.

(3.) The heathen in mass, with no single definite and unquestionable exception on record, are evidently strangers to God, -- and going down to death in an unsaved condition. The presumed possibility of being saved without a knowledge of Christ remains, after eighteen hundred years, a possibility illustrated by no example.
11.1 Those whom God effectually calleth, he also freely justifieth: not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ’s sake alone; nor by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness; but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on him and his righteousness, by faith; which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God.

Commentary:
God justifies us, or declares us to be righteous, not by making us righteous (that’s sanctification) and not because of anything in us at all, but only for Christ’s sake (as we believe on him alone as he is offered in the Gospel), and by the imputation of his obedience and satisfaction to us. So, we are justified, declared not guilty, pardoned, accepted, forgiven and acquitted not on the basis of something in us (our righteousness), but on the basis of something outside of us (Christ’s righteousness).

J.I. Packer says: “The doctrine of justification, the storm center of the Reformation, was a major concern of the apostle Paul. For him it was the heart of the gospel (Rom. 1:17; 3:21–5:21; Gal. 2:15–5:1) shaping both his message (Acts 13:38-39) and his devotion and spiritual life (2 Cor. 5:13–21; Phil. 3:4-14). Though other New Testament writers affirm the same doctrine in substance, the terms in which Protestants have affirmed and defended it for almost five centuries are drawn primarily from Paul.

“Justification is a judicial act of God pardoning sinners (wicked and ungodly persons, Rom. 4:5; 3:9-24), accepting them as just, and so putting permanently right their previously estranged relationship with himself. This justifying sentence is God’s gift of righteousness (Rom. 5:15-17), his bestowal of a status of acceptance for Jesus’ sake (2 Cor. 5:21).

“God’s justifying judgment seems strange, for pronouncing sinners righteous may appear to be precisely the unjust action on the judge’s part that God’s own law forbade (Deut. 25:1; Prov. 17:15). Yet it is in fact a just judgment, for its basis is the righteousness of Jesus Christ who as “the last Adam” (1 Cor. 15:45), our representative head acting on our behalf, obeyed the law that bound us and endured the retribution for lawlessness that was our due and so (to use a medieval technical term) “merited” our justification. So we are justified justly, on the basis of justice done (Rom. 3:25-26) and Christ’s righteousness reckoned to our account (Rom. 5:18-19).

“God’s justifying decision is the judgment of the Last Day, declaring where we shall spend eternity, brought forward into the present and pronounced here and now. It is the last judgment that will ever be passed on our destiny; God will never go back on it, however much Satan may appeal against God’s verdict (Zech. 3:1; Rev. 12:10; Rom. 8:33-34). To be justified is to be eternally secure (Rom. 5:1-5; 8:30).

“The necessary means, or instrumental cause, of justification is personal faith in Jesus Christ as crucified Savior and risen Lord (Rom. 4:23-25; 10:8-13). This is because the meritorious ground of our justification is entirely in Christ. As we give ourselves in faith to Jesus, Jesus gives us his gift of righteousness, so that in the very act of “closing with Christ,” as older Reformed teachers put it, we receive divine pardon and acceptance which we could not otherwise have (Gal. 2:15-16; 3:24).

“Official Roman Catholic theology includes sanctification in the definition of justification, which it sees as a process rather than a single decisive event, and affirms that while faith contributes to our acceptance with God, our works of satisfaction and merit contribute too. Rome sees baptism, viewed as a channel of sanctifying grace, as the primary instrumental cause of justification, and the sacrament of penance, whereby congruous merit is achieved through works of satisfaction, as the supplementary restorative cause whenever the grace of God’s initial acceptance is lost through mortal sin. Congruous, as distinct from condign, merit means merit that it is fitting, though not absolutely necessary, for God to reward by a fresh flow of sanctifying grace. On the Roman Catholic view, therefore, believers save themselves with the help of the grace that flows from Christ through the church’s sacramental system, and in this life no sense of confidence in God’s grace can ordinarily be had. Such teaching is a far cry from that of Paul.
11.2 Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification: yet is it not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love.

Commentary:
This section explains the role or function of our faith in God’s act of justification. Our faith does not justify us. It is not the basis, reason or cause of God’s act of justification. Instead, it is the divinely appointed and gifted means whereby we receive justification. It is, to use the technical theological terms, the instrument but not the ground of our justification. This section also makes it clear that faith is the alone or only or solitary instrument appointed by God whereby we receive justification (not faith plus works, not faith plus love, not faith plus sacraments, but faith alone).

Ward outlines Westminster 11 this way:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analysis</th>
<th>WCF 11:1-6</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Justification defined</td>
<td>a. a gracious act of God</td>
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<td>b. involving complete pardon and full acceptance</td>
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<td>d. imputed and received through faith alone</td>
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<td>2. Justification in its relations</td>
<td>a. Christ the ground</td>
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<td>b. faith the instrument</td>
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<td>c. works the evidence</td>
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<td>3. Justification and God’s character</td>
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<td>5. The sins of the justified</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Justification before Christ’s resurrection</td>
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Ward goes on to say of this section of WCF 11 - “Rome professed concern for morality in her objection to justification by faith alone, but she does not see the marvel of God’s saving purposes as she ought. This section affirms that faith is the only means, that it rests on Christ, and that it shows its reality by what accompanies or flows from it. Good works are fruits of a new relationship, not means of establishing it. Faith alone justifies because it looks away from itself and is centred in the person of Jesus Christ. In some sections of Protestantism there is a nominalism which, while rejecting the additions of Rome, nevertheless rests content with a faith which is traditional or historical. This ‘cheap grace’ concept (as it has been called) might properly be termed a dead faith. A faith not evidenced by deeds is a spurious faith, as James reminds us in his epistle. In summary: We are justified by Christ meritoriously, by faith instrumentally, and by works evidentially.”

To belabor Ward’s well-made final point: (1) Jesus’ whole obedience to and satisfaction of the Law on our behalf, imputed to us, is the basis of our justification. Jesus merits, or earns our justification by his works (which is one reason why the idea of justification by our works is such an offensive doctrine to God). (2) Our faith, which is itself the gift of God, is not the basis but the means, or instrument, or way by which we receive justification. (3) Our subsequent life of good works, love and growth in grace, is not the basis or reason why we are or will be justified, but is in fact the evidence and goal of our justification.
Chapter 11 - Of Justification

(11.3 Justification is both just and grace, costly and free)

11.3 Christ, by his obedience and death, did fully discharge the debt of all those that are thus justified, and did make a proper, real, and full satisfaction to his Father’s justice in their behalf. Yet, inasmuch as he was given by the Father for them; and his obedience and satisfaction accepted in their stead; and both, freely, not for anything in them; their justification is only of free grace; that both the exact justice and rich grace of God might be glorified in the justification of sinners.

Commentary:

Ward says: “The price of justification has been fully met by Christ but the justification of the elect remains an act of free grace since all that was required God himself provided at his cost. Notice again that the atonement is described as a sacrifice by which satisfaction has been made to the Father’s justice (cf. WCF 8:5). The atonement did not procure the Father’s love but flowed from it. Free justification does not mean the ruin of God’s character, but its vindication. He remains just and the one who justifies whoever believes in Jesus (Rom 3:25-26).”

Robert Shaw adds: “Socinians deny that Christ made any real and proper satisfaction to divine justice in behalf of his people; and their grand objection to this doctrine is, that it leaves no room for the exercise of grace in the salvation of sinners. Many modern writers, of a different class, deny that Christ satisfied retributive justice, and insist that he only satisfied public justice; consequently, they must maintain, that he neither discharged the debt of those who are justified, nor made a proper satisfaction in their behalf.

“Indeed, they hold that a debt of obedience or a debt of punishment, is, in its nature, intransferable; of course, neither was transferred to Christ, and neither was paid by him. The demands of the law, in respect both of obedience and satisfaction, instead of being exacted by Jehovah, and fulfilled by Christ, are, in their opinion, by an act of divine sovereignty, "suspended, superseded, overruled."

“And the chief argument which they urge against the doctrine of a "proper, real, and full satisfaction" to divine justice is, "its excluding anything of the nature of grace from every part of the process of a sinner’s salvation, excepting the original appointment of the Surety."

“The statement of our Confession, in this section, is directly opposed to these views; and in confirmation of it, we need only refer to the explicit testimony of the Scriptures. "By the obedience of one shall many be made righteous." - Rom. v. 19. What stronger proof could we desire that Christ discharged the debt of obedience due by those who are justified? "By his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities." - Isa. liii. 11. ""Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us." - Gal. iii. 13. What words could more clearly convey the sentiment, that Christ endured the very penalty of the broken law, and thereby made "a proper, real, and full satisfaction to his Father’s justice," in behalf of all whom he represented?

“But the justification of sinners, "through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus," instead of excluding or obscuring, serves rather to illustrate the glory of the grace displayed in it. Grace shines in God’s condescending to accept of the righteousness of a surety; still more in his providing the surety: above all, in giving his only begotten Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Besides, that faith by which we receive the righteousness of Christ is the gift of God.—Eph. ii. 8. "The glory of the gospel is, that grace reigns through righteousness. Salvation is of grace; but this grace comes to us in a way of righteousness. It is grace to us; but it was brought about in such a way that all our debt was paid. This exhibits God as just as well as merciful. Just, in requiring full compensation to justice; and merciful, because it was he, and not the sinner, who provided the ransom."
Chapter 11 - Of Justification

(11.4 Justification flows from God’s eternal decree but takes places in time)

11.4 God did, from all eternity, decree to justify all the elect, and Christ did, in the fullness of time, die for their sins, and rise again for their justification: nevertheless, they are not justified, until the Holy Spirit doth, in due time, actually apply Christ unto them.

Commentary:

Ward articulates the straightforward meaning of this section this way: “None can be saved apart from the eternal decree and the work of Christ but none are actually justified until the redemption purchased by Christ is applied to them in regeneration and they as a consequence believe. The eternal decree includes the time of application to the individual. Until then they are children of wrath like others (Eph 2:3) although, viewed in union with Christ, they shared in Christ’s resurrection, ascension and session at God’s right hand (Eph 2:4-6).”

Hodge further explains: “It has been objected to our doctrine by some Arminians, and held as a part of it by some Antinomians, that if Christ literally paid the debt of his elect in his obedience and suffering when on earth, it must follow that the elect have been justified from the moment that debt was paid. The Scriptures, on the contrary, as well as all Christian experience, make it certain that no one is justified until the moment that God gives him saving faith in Christ.

“Christ paid the penal, not the money debt of his people. It is a matter of free grace that his substitution was admitted. The satisfaction, therefore, does not liberate ipso facto, like the payment of a money debt, but sets the real criminal free only on such conditions and at such times as had been previously agreed upon between God, the gracious sovereign, on the one hand, and Christ, their representative and substitute, on the other hand. Christ died for his people in execution of a covenant between himself and his Father, entered into in eternity. The effects of his death, therefore, eventuate precisely as and when it is provided in the covenant that it should do so.”

Shaw further elaborates: “This section is directed against the Antinomian error, that the elect were justified from eternity, or when the price of their redemption was paid by Christ. It is readily admitted that God, from eternity, decreed to justify the elect; but till the period of effectual calling they are in a state of wrath and condemnation.—Eph. ii. 3; John iii. 18. The righteousness by which they are justified was perfected in Christ’s death, and the perfection of it was declared by his resurrection, and they may be said to have been virtually justified when Christ was acquitted and discharged as their head and representative; nevertheless, they are not actually and formally justified until they are vitally united to Christ by faith.”

The point of this section then is to, on the one hand, do justice to passages like Titus 3:3-7 in which Paul says: “For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior,” so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life” (ESV). Paul wants us to understand that all of us were really once sinners (not eternally justified) and in the complex of our conversion received the gift of justification in time. On the other hand, this section wants to warn us off of crazy theological deductions from the idea of an “eternal justification.” Justification flows from an act that has as its impetus the eternal decree, but an act that is worked out in time, and justification is applied in time and with a view to the final judgment.
Chapter 11 - Of Justification

(11.5 Justification doesn’t mean that we become indifferent about our sin)

11.5 God doth continue to forgive the sins of those that are justified; and, although they can never fall from the state of justification, yet they may, by their sins, fall under God’s fatherly displeasure, and not have the light of his countenance restored unto them, until they humble themselves, confess their sins, beg pardon, and renew their faith and repentance.

Commentary:

This section is vitally important because some well-meaning Christians incorrectly deduce from the doctrine of justification, that since we are forgiven: (1) God is never angry with us again; (2) that we don’t have to and shouldn’t ever feel guilty about or ashamed of our sin, because they have all already been forgiven. To do so, they say, shows that “we don’t understand grace” and we are burdened by “false guilt.” Well, this view, though sincere, is utterly wrong and unbiblical. This section and its Scripture proofs tell you why.

Ward says: “Believers still sin, feel it, and pray for forgiveness each day. Justification, being God’s act apart from anything in them, cannot be destroyed, but their sins are deservedly, and perhaps severely, punished by fatherly chastisement. ‘The justified may fall under the Father’s displeasure but they never fall out of his purpose of grace.’ (J.B.Green)”

Shaw explains: “As justification is an act completed at once, so those who are justified cannot come into condemnation: “There is now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus.” —Rom. viii. 1. The sins which they afterwards commit cannot revoke the pardon which God has graciously given them; but they may subject them to his fatherly displeasure, and to temporary chastisements.—Ps. lxxxix. 30-33. Here we must advert to the well-known distinction between judicial and fatherly forgiveness. Though God, in the capacity of a judge, pardons all the sins of believers, in the most free and unconditional manner, in the day of their justification, yet that forgiveness which, as a father, he bestows upon his justified and adopted children, is not, in general, vouchsafed without suitable preparation on their part for receiving and improving the privilege. They ought, therefore, to humble themselves before God, make ingenuous confession of their offences, renew their faith and repentance, and earnestly supplicate the removal of his fatherly displeasure, and the restoration of his paternal smiles.”

Hodge adds: “This section teaches that justification changes radically and permanently the relation which the subject of it sustains both to God and to the demands of the divine law viewed as a condition of favor. Before justification, God is an angry judge, holding the sentence of the condemning law for a season in suspense. After justification, the law instead of condemning acquits, and demands that the subject be regarded and treated like a son, as is provided in the eternal covenant; and God, as a loving Father, proceeds to execute all the kind offices which belong to the new relation. This requires, of course, discipline and correction, as well as instruction and consolation. All suffering is either mere calamity, when viewed aside from all intentional relation to human character; or penalty, when designed to satisfy justice for sin; or chastisement, when designed to correct and improve the offender. Irrespective of the economy of redemption, all suffering is to the reprobate installments of the eternal penalty. After justification, all suffering to the justified, of whatever kind, is fatherly chastisement, designed to correct their faults and improve their graces. And as they came, in the first instance, to God in the exercise of repentance and faith in Christ, so must they always continue to return to him after every partial wandering and loss of his sensible favor in the exercise of the same repentance and faith; and thus only can they hope to have his pardon sensibly renewed to them.”
Chapter 11 - Of Justification

(11.6 Justification has always been by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone)

11.6 The justification of believers under the Old Testament was, in all these respects, one and the same with the justification of believers under the New Testament.

Commentary:

Ward says: "The texts cited provide ample proof of this section, and further expansion may be found in WCF 7:3-6. The case of Abraham is decisive. Indeed, it is to God's covenant with Abraham that every spiritual blessing Christians enjoy may be traced."

Shaw says: "The reverse of this is maintained by Socinians. We shall only observe, that though "the righteousness of God" is now more clearly manifested by the gospel, yet it was "witnessed by the law and the prophets."—Rom. iii. 21. And those, under the Old Testament, who laid hold upon that righteousness by faith, were as really and fully justified as believers under the New Testament. Paul, accordingly, adduces the justification of Abraham as an example of the method in which believers in all ages must be justified.—Rom. iv. 3. Though the everlasting righteousness was not actually brought in until Christ "became obedient unto death," yet the efficacy of his death extended to believers under the former as well as under the present dispensation.

“What an invaluable and transcendently glorious privilege is justification! How unspeakably blessed is the man to whom God imputes righteousness without works! Delivered from the awful curse of the broken law, and introduced into a state of acceptance and favour with God, all penal evil is extracted out of the cup of his affliction, death itself is divested of its sting, and all things shall work together for his good. Adorned with the glorious robe of the Redeemer's righteousness, he shall stand before the judgment-seat undismayed, while the exalted Saviour and Judge shall bid him welcome to that state of final and everlasting blessedness which God has prepared for him, saying, "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." But where will the sinner and the ungodly appear in that day when the Son of man shall sit upon the throne of his glory, and summon them before his august tribunal to receive their final doom? How will the impenitent and unbelieving - all who have not submitted to the righteousness of God - then "call to the mountains and rocks to fall upon them and hide them from the face of Him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb." Let those who have hitherto been labouring to establish their own righteousness cease from their attempt - let them recede the gift of righteousness which is presented for their acceptance in the offer of the gospel and let them plead this perfect and glorious righteousness, and improve it by faith, as the sole ground of all their expectations from a God of grace either in time or through eternity. Renouncing all dependence on their own works of righteousness, let them, like Paul, desire to "win Christ, and be found in him, not having their own righteousness, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith."

Great Quotes

“That faith is properly called justifying by which we rely upon Christ for the remission of sins and for salvation. For Christ is a sufficient object for justifying faith. Faith justifies only by apprehending the righteousness by which we are justified. That righteousness does not lie in the truth of some proposition to which we give assent, but in Christ alone who has been made sin for us that we might be righteousness in him, 2 Cor 5:21.” William Ames (1576-1633), The Marrow of Theology (1623) I xxvii.17

“Now this faith which unites to Christ and justifies a man who has hitherto been ungodly is itself a fruit of the new birth. It does not by any means precede that birth, nor is it in any degree the cause of it. It is not its cause but its outcome. Yet it is so the fruit of the new birth as that no interval of time elapses between that birth and the breathing of the new life of faith. In the order of time there is not a space that would allow for a razor's edge to come in between them. Yet in the order of nature or of cause and effect the one is the cause of the other. The new birth in this sense is the working or the production of faith in the heart and the heart acts that faith as soon as it is wrought.” - John Macleod (1872-1948), Scottish Theology (1946),125.
Chapter 12 - Of Adoption

(12 We are not only pardoned by God but adopted by him)

12.1 All those that are justified, God vouchsafeth, in and for his only Son Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption, by which they are taken into the number, and enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God, have his name put upon them, receive the spirit of adoption, have access to the throne of grace with boldness, are enabled to cry, Abba, Father, are pitied, protected, provided for, and chastened by him, as by a Father: yet never cast off, but sealed to the day of redemption; and inherit the promises, as heirs of everlasting salvation.

Commentary:

J.I. Packer addresses “Adoption” like this: “God makes his people his children.” “Paul teaches that the gift of justification (i.e., present acceptance by God as the world’s Judge) brings with it the status of sonship by adoption (i.e., permanent intimacy with God as one’s heavenly Father, Gal. 3:26; 4:4-7). In Paul’s world, adoption was ordinarily of young adult males of good character to become heirs and maintain the family name of the childless rich. Paul, however, proclaims God’s gracious adoption of persons of bad character to become “heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ” (Rom. 8:17).

“Justification is the basic blessing, on which adoption is founded; adoption is the crowning blessing, to which justification clears the way. Adopted status belongs to all who receive Christ (John 1:12). The adopted status of believers means that in and through Christ God loves them as he loves his only-begotten Son and will share with them all the glory that is Christ’s now (Rom. 8:17, 38-39). Here and now, believers are under God’s fatherly care and discipline (Matt. 6:26; Heb. 12:5-11) and are directed, especially by Jesus, to live their whole lives in light of the knowledge that God is their Father in heaven. They are to pray to him as such (Matt. 6:5-13), imitate him as such (Matt. 5:44-48; 6:12, 14-15; 18:21-35; Eph. 4:32–5:2), and trust him as such (Matt. 6:25-34), thus expressing the filial instinct that the Holy Spirit has implanted in them (Rom. 8:15-17; Gal. 4:6).

“Adoption and regeneration accompany each other as two aspects of the salvation that Christ brings (John 1:12-13), but they are to be distinguished. Adoption is the bestowal of a relationship, while regeneration is the transformation of our moral nature. Yet the link is evident; God wants his children, whom he loves, to bear his character, and takes action accordingly.

Shaw lists ten privileges of adoption: 1. They obtain a new name. A stranger taken into the family of another, received the name of the adopter, and those whom God adopts “are called by a new name, which the mouth of the Lord hath named,” even by the honourable and endearing name of “the sons and daughters of the Lord Almighty.” —Isa. lxii. 2; 2 Cor. vi. 18. 2. They receive the spirit of adoption. Rom. viii. 15; Gal. iv. 6. The Spirit implants in them the dispositions of children, and transforms them into the image of God’s dear Son—he witnesses with their spirits that they are the sons of God—he seals them to the day of redemption, and is the earnest of their inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession. —Rom. viii. 16; Eph. i. 13, 14. 3. They have access to the throne of grace with boldness. God allows his children to draw near to him with freedom, to pour out their hearts before him, to make all their requests known to him; and they may cherish this confidence, that if they ask anything according to his will, he heareth them. —1 John v. 14. 4. They are the objects of God’s fatherly sympathy and pity. He knows their frame, and remembers that they are but dust; and when he sees it necessary to correct them, he feels for them with the bowels of parental compassion. —Ps. ciii. 13. 5. They enjoy the protection of their heavenly Father. Numerous are their spiritual enemies, and manifold the dangers to which they are exposed; but he who neither slumbers nor sleeps, watches over them with unwearied care. He gives his angels charge concerning them, who encamp around them, and, in ways unknown to us, perform many kind offices for them. —Ps. xxiv. 7; Heb. i. 14. 6. They are provided for by their heavenly Father. He knows they need his providential favours in this world, and these he does not withhold. —Matt. vi. 30; Ps. xxxiv. 9, 10. For their souls he has made suitable provision in his Word, and he communicates to them supplies of grace according to their diversified circumstances. —Phil. iv. 19. 7. Paternal correction is not withheld when necessary. —Heb. xii. 6. This, indeed, they are apt to regard as a punishment rather than a privilege; but it is the fruit of paternal love, it is intended for their profit, and is promised as a blessing. —Ps. lxxiii. 30-34. These corrections, though not for the present joyous, but grievous, promote their spiritual advantage; and many of God’s children have acknowledged, from their happy experience, that it was punishment rather than a privilege; but it is the fruit of paternal love, it is intended for their profit, and is promised as a blessing. —Ps. lviii. 15-17; Gal. 4:6. 8. Unfalling establishment in their state of sonship, and in all the privileges connected with that state. As their heavenly Father will never cast them off, so he secures that they shall not totally and finally depart from him. —Jer. xxxii. 40. 9. They are heirs of all the promises. These are exceeding great and precious; they are adapted to every condition in which the children of God can be placed; and faithful is He who hath promised. —Heb. vi. 12, 17. 10. They are heirs of a rich and glorious inheritance, reserved for them in heaven. —1 Pet. i. 4. They are “heirs of salvation.” —Heb. i. 14; “heirs of the grace of life,” —1 Pet. iii. 7; “heirs of the kingdom,” —James ii. 5; and “heirs of God.” —Rom. viii. 17.
Chapter 13 - Of Sanctification

(13.1 God not only declares us righteous, he begins to make us holy when he saves us)

13.1 They, who are once effectually called, and regenerated, having a new heart, and a new spirit created in them, are further sanctified, really and personally, through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, by his Word and Spirit dwelling in them: the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed, and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified; and they more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces, to the practice of true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.

Commentary:

J.I. Packer says: "Sanctification, says the Westminster Shorter Catechism (Q.35), is "the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness." The concept is not of sin being totally eradicated (that is to claim too much) or merely counteracted (that is to say too little), but of a divinely wrought character change freeing us from sinful habits and forming in us Christlike affections, dispositions, and virtues.

"Sanctification is an ongoing transformation within a maintained consecration, and it engenders real righteousness within the frame of relational holiness. Relational sanctification, the state of being permanently set apart for God, flows from the cross, where God through Christ purchased and claimed us for himself (Acts 20:28; 26:18; Heb. 10:10). Moral renovation, whereby we are increasingly changed from what we once were, flows from the agency of the indwelling Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:13; 12:1-2; 1 Cor. 6:11, 19-20; 2 Cor. 3:18; Eph. 4:22-24; 1 Thess. 5:23; 2 Thess. 2:13; Heb. 13:20-21). God calls his children to sanctity and graciously gives what he commands (1 Thess. 4:4; 5:23).

"Regeneration is birth; sanctification is growth. In regeneration, God implants desires that were not there before: desire for God, for holiness, and for the hallowing and glorifying of God's name in this world; desire to pray, worship, love, serve, honor, and please God; desire to show love and bring benefit to others. In sanctification, the Holy Spirit "works in you to will and to act" according to God's purpose; what he does is prompt you to "work out your salvation" (i.e., express it in action) by fulfilling these new desires (Phil. 2:12-13). Christians become increasingly Christlike as the moral profile of Jesus (the "fruit of the Spirit") is progressively formed in them (2 Cor. 3:18; Gal. 4:19; 5:22-25). Paul's use of glory in 2 Corinthians 3:18 shows that for him sanctification of character is glorification begun. Then the physical transformation that gives us a body like Christ's, one that will match our totally transformed character and be a perfect means of expressing it, will be glorification completed (Phil. 3:20-21; 1 Cor. 15:49-53).

"Regeneration was a momentary monergistic act of quickening the spiritually dead. As such, it was God's work alone. Sanctification, however, is in one sense synergistic—it is an ongoing cooperative process in which regenerate persons, alive to God and freed from sin's dominion (Rom. 6:11, 14-18), are required to exert themselves in sustained obedience. God's method of sanctification is neither activism (self-reliant activity) nor apathy (God-reliant passivity), but God-dependent effort (2 Cor. 7:1; Phil. 3:10-14; Heb. 12:14). Knowing that without Christ's enabling we can do nothing, morally speaking, as we should, and that he is ready to strengthen us for all that we have to do (Phil. 4:13), we "stay put" (remain, abide) in Christ, asking for his help constantly—and we receive it (Col. 1:11; 1 Tim. 1:12; 2 Tim. 1:7; 2:1).

"The standard to which God's work of sanctifying his saints is directed is his own revealed moral law, as expounded and modeled by Christ himself. Christ's love, humility, and patience under pressure are to be consciously imitated (Eph. 5:2; Phil. 2:5-11; 1 Pet. 2:21), for a Christlike spirit and attitude are part of what law-keeping involves.

"Believers find within themselves contrary urgings. The Spirit sustains their regenerate desires and purposes; their fallen, Adamic instincts (the "flesh") which, though dethroned, are not yet destroyed, constantly distract them from doing God's will and allure them along paths that lead to death (Gal. 5:16-17; James 1:14-15). To clarify the relationship between the law and sin, Paul analyzes in a personal and dramatic way the sense of impotence for complete law-keeping, and the enslavement to behavior one dislikes, that the Spirit-flesh tension produces (Rom. 7:14-25). This conflict and frustration will be with Christians as long as they are in the body. Yet by watching and praying against temptation, and cultivating opposite virtues, they may through the Spirit's help "mortify" (i.e., drain the life out of, weaken as a means of killing) particular bad habits, and in that sense more and more die unto sin (Rom. 8:13; Col. 3:5). They will experience many particular deliverances and victories in their unending battle with sin, while never being exposed to temptations that are impossible to resist (1 Cor. 10:13)."
Chapter 13 - Of Sanctification

(13.2 We do not become completely holy in this life)

13.2 This sanctification is throughout, in the whole man; yet imperfect in this life, there abiding still some remnants of corruption in every part; whence a riseth a continual and irreconcilable war, the flesh lusting against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh.

Commentary:

Ward outlines this chapter this way:

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He goes on to say: "While sanctification is an inevitable accompaniment of justification, and logically follows it, sanctification begins in regeneration hence the subjects of sanctification are described as 'the effectively called and regenerated'. This reminds us that sanctification begins in a new creation, and initiates the change of which progressive sanctification is the development. Hence Paul's insistence that those united to Christ cannot go on in sin: 'How shall we who died to sin still live in it?' (Rom 6:2)."

"Sanctification touches every part of our life - mind, heart and will - but finds every part of our life has some remnants of corruption. As a result there is a constant struggle. However, there is a difference between the remnant of sin and the reign of sin. Sin does not reign nor are we to allow it to do so. Sanctification is not a matter of 'letting go and letting God' but it is a matter of engaging in the good fight of faith."

Shaw says: "Sanctification is imperfect in this life. There have been men, and there still are, who maintain, that sinless perfection is attainable in this life. This is held by Antinomians, who profess that the perfect holiness of Christ is imputed to believers. It is held likewise by Romanists, Socinians, and others, who affirm that believers have, or may attain, a perfect inherent holiness. The doctrine of sinless perfection was also held by the founder of the Methodists; and the same opinion is still held by his followers. In opposition to such views, our Confession decidedly affirms, that sanctification is "imperfect in this life." Though it extends to the whole man, yet "there abideth still some remnants of corruption in every part." The Scriptures abound with the most explicit testimonies against the doctrine of sinless perfection.—Eccl. vii 20; James iii. 2; Prov. xx. 9; 1 John i. 8. The epithet perfect is indeed applied to several saints, but it must be understood either comparatively, in which sense "Noah was perfect in his generation;" or, as synonymous with sincerity or uprightness, in which sense God said to Abraham, "Walk before me, and be thou perfect." That the most eminent saints mentioned in Scripture were not free from sin, is evident from the defects and blemishes which are discovered in their conduct. They were far from imagining that they had attained to sinless perfection.—Job ix. 20; Ps. xix. 12; Phil. iii. 12. Every real Christian will certainly aspire after perfection; but none can attain to absolute perfection in this life."
Chapter 13 - Of Sanctification

November 3

(13.3 Holiness will win in the end, but it’s a war)

13.3 In which war, although the remaining corruption, for a time, may much prevail; yet, through the continual supply of strength from the sanctifying Spirit of Christ, the regenerate part doth overcome; and so, the saints grow in grace, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

Commentary:

This section and chapter as a whole is a strong rejection of both perfectionism and licence. Some teach that Christians can obtain perfection. This is utterly false. Others teach that holiness does not matter for the Christian (since we have been saved by grace). WCF 13 corrects both of these errors.

Of 13.3, Ward says: “The believer is able to engage in this struggle with confidence as a result of his position in Christ as dead to sin but alive to God. He is constantly to appreciate this and prosecute the war by mortification of sin and growth in holiness. The role of the Scriptures, prayer and worship are important (Romans 12:1-2; Heb 10:25) and so is disciplined living so that bad habits are replaced by good ones, faith working by obedience to the directions of God’s word. A very large part of the New Testament consists of exhortations and directives to believers with a view to furthering their sanctification. The outcome is beyond doubt. [The 1646 text reads: ‘the regenerate part doth overcome’ for ‘the new nature overcomes,’ a slightly ambiguous and less than happy expression for the Christian’s growth in holiness given that a new heart has been given to him (WCF 13:1).]

“Perfectionism, in the sense that a person can in this life attain to what God requires, confuses several things. Believers are saved from sin but not yet saved from sinning. Perfectionism requires the redefinition of sin so as to exclude the motivation for actions and the evil desires of our hearts. In this sense it breeds complacency and hypocrisy, but it also furthers legalism (the wrong use of the law) since the concentration is on outward things. Entire sanctification is not a crisis experience by which inbred sin is cleansed away but it is the consummation of a process rooted in a radical break with sin at conversion. Perhaps the failure to emphasise the radical break with sin involved in any real conversion contributed by way of reaction to the erroneous perfectionist views of holiness churches in the older Methodist tradition. But perfectionism remains unbiblical and harmful in its consequences. Strikingly, its great advocate, John Wesley (1702-91), never claimed the experience. It is alarming that so many lesser lights do.”

Shaw adds: “Holiness, though it cannot give us a title to heaven, is indispensably necessary. It is necessary by a divine and unalterable constitution; for "without holiness no man shall see the Lord."—Heb. xii. 14. God has enacted it as an immutable law, that nothing which defileth shall enter into the heavenly city.—Rev. xxi. 27. It is necessary, also, as a preparative for heaven. It is the evidence of our title, and constitutes our meetness for enjoying the pleasures and engaging in the work of the heavenly world. "Blessed are the pure in heart; for they shall see God."—Matt. v. 8.

"Let us, then, in the diligent use of appointed means, earnestly "follow holiness" "This is the will of God, even our sanctification." This is his express command: "Be ye holy; for I am holy." Those whom he ordained to glory as the end, he chose to holiness as the means, without which none shall ever attain that end.—Eph. i. 4. This is also, the end of our redemption by Jesus Christ.—Eph. v. 25, 26. He died not only to save us from wrath, but to save us from our sins. Holiness was the primeval glory of our nature, and shall we not endeavour to recover that glory—to be restored to the image of him who created us? Holiness is eminently the glory of God; and shall we not seek to resemble him in sanctity? Holiness is necessary to make us "meet for being partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light." Presumptuous and delusive is that hope of seeing Christ hereafter; which does not produce an ardent desire and earnest endeavour to be conformed to him here. “Even man that hath this hope in him purified himself, even as he is pure.” - 1 John in. 3.”
Chapter 14 - Of Saving Faith

(14.1 Faith is a grace of the Spirit, wrought by the word, increased by the sacraments and prayer)

14.1 The grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts, and is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word, by which also, and by the administration of the sacraments, and prayer, it is increased and strengthened.

Commentary:

Ward outlines this chapter like this:

<table>
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<th>ANALYSIS WCF 14:1-3</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. The origin of faith</td>
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<td>a. God’s gift to the elect</td>
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<td>a. it accepts everything that is revealed in Scripture</td>
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<td>c. its principal work is trust in Christ alone for salvation</td>
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Ward goes on to say: “Faith and repentance could have been taken after WCF 10, which dealt with God’s effective call, since they result from it, and faith is the instrumental cause of justification, the topic of WCF 11. But the Confession treats first of the gracious work of God before turning to the human response to grace.”

“Saving faith (WCF 14) and true repentance (WCF 15) are two sides of the one coin - whoever truly repents believes, and whoever truly believes repents - but are treated in separate chapters for convenience. ‘Repentance denotes that aspect of change whereby the soul turns from sin and experiences true abhorrence of it. Faith denotes that aspect of change whereby the soul turns to Christ and experiences true attachment to him.’ (G.I. Williamson)”

“Faith is a grace, that is, a divine gift to the elect, by which they lay hold of salvation. Faith does not secure election but is a fruit of it. In the case of those who have the faculties to hear the external call the Spirit of God uses the word of God in working this faith. It continues to be strengthened by the means of grace blessed by the Spirit of God.

“There are varieties of faith other than saving faith. Traditional faith or historical faith are all very well but as they do not appropriate Christ as Saviour they cannot save. Faith is not mere assent but it is belief and commitment wrought by a supernatural agency (cf. WCF 1:1).”

The Larger Catechism asks and answers: Q. 72 What is justifying faith? A. Justifying faith is a saving grace, wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit and Word of God, whereby he, being convinced of his sin and misery, and of the disability in himself and all other creatures to recover him out of his lost condition, not only assenteth to the truth of the promise of the gospel, but receiveth and resteth upon Christ and his righteousness, therein held forth, for pardon of sin, and for the accepting and accounting of his person righteous in the sight of God for salvation.

Q. 73 How doth faith justify a sinner in the sight of God? A. Faith justifies a sinner in the sight of God, not because of those other graces which do always accompany it, or of good works that are the fruits of it, nor as if the grace of faith, or any act thereof, were imputed to him for his justification; but only as it is an instrument by which he receiveth and applieth Christ and his righteousness.
Chapter 14 - Of Saving Faith

(14.2 Saving faith defined)

14.2 By this faith, a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God himself speaking therein; and acteth differently upon that which each particular passage thereof containeth; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life, and that which is to come. But the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.

Commentary:

Hodge says: "This section teaches –
1. That saving faith rests upon the truth of the testimony of God speaking in his Word.
2. That it respects as its object all the contents of God's Word, without exception.
3. That the complex state of mind to which the epithet "faith" is applied in Scripture varies with the nature of the particular passage of God's Word which is its object.
4. That the specific act of saving faith which unites us to Christ, and is the sole condition or instrument of justification, involves two essential elements: (1.) Assent to what the Scriptures reveal to us concerning the person, offices, and work of Christ; and (2.) Trust or implicit reliance upon Christ alone, for all that is involved in a complete salvation.

1. Saving faith rests upon the truth of the testimony of God speaking in his Word.
2. Saving faith receives as true all the contents of God's Word, without exception.
3. Trust is certainly an element of the very essence of that state of mind called in Scripture faith.
4. That specific act of saving faith which unites to Christ, and is the sole condition and instrument of justification, involves two essential elements: -- (1.) Assent to whatever the Scriptures reveal to us as to the person, offices, and work of Christ. (a.) The Scriptures expressly say that we are justified by that faith of which Christ is the object. Rom. iii. 22, 25; Gal. ii. 16; Phil. iii. 9. (b.) Rejection of Christ in Scripture is declared to be the ground of reprobation. John iii. 18, 19; viii. 24. Assent includes an intellectual recognition and a cordial embrace of the object at the same time. It is an act of the whole man -- intellect, affection, and will -- embracing the truth. This especial act of faith in Christ, which secures salvation, is constantly paraphrased by such phrases as "coming to Christ," John vi. 35; "looking to him," Isa. xlv. 22; "receiving him," John i. 12; "fleeing to him for refuge," Heb. vi. 18; -- all of which manifestly involve an active assent to and cordial embrace, as well as an intellectual recognition of the truth.

(2.) The second element included in that act of faith that saves the soul is trust, or implicit reliance upon Christ, and upon Christ alone, for all that is involved in a complete salvation. (a.) The single condition of salvation demanded in the Scriptures is that we should "believe in" or "on" Christ Jesus. And salvation is promised absolutely and certainly if this command is obeyed. John vii. 38; Acts x. 43; xvi. 31; Gal. ii. 16. To believe in or on a person, implies trust as well as credence. (b.) We are constantly said to be saved "by faith in" or "on Christ." Acts xxvi. 18; Gal. iii. 26; 2 Tim. iii. 15. "Faith is the substance of things hoped for." Heb. xi. 1. Trust rests upon the foundation upon which expectation is based. Hope reaches forward to the object upon which desire and expectation meet. Hope, therefore, rests upon trust, and trust gives birth to hope, and faith must include trust in order to give reality or substance to the things hoped for. (c.) The same is proved by what are said to be the effects or fruits of faith. By faith the Christian is said to be "persuaded of the promises; "to obtain them; "to embrace them; "to subdue kingdoms; "to work righteousness; "to stop the mouths of lions." Heb. xi. All this plainly presupposes that faith is not a bare intellectual conviction of the truth of truths revealed in the Scriptures, but that it includes a hearty embrace of and a confident reliance upon Christ, his meritorious work and his gracious promises.
(14.3 Faith grows, and so does assurance)

14.3 This faith is different in degrees, weak or strong; may be often and many ways assailed, and weakened, but gets the victory: growing up in many to the attainment of a full assurance, through Christ, who is both the author and finisher of our faith.

Commentary:

Hodge says: “In this section it is affirmed — 1. That this faith, although always as to essence the same, is often different in degrees in different persons, and in the same person at different times. 2. That it is exposed to many enemies, and may be often and in many ways assailed and weakened, but that, through divine grace, it always in the end gains the victory. 3. That in many it grows up to the measure of a full assurance through Christ.”

Shaw helpfully observes: “Different interpretations have been put on this section. Some have maintained, that “assurance is here plainly made a fruit and consequent of saving faith, and not an essential act.” Others have held that assurance is here supposed to be essential to saving faith, and that it belongs, in some degree, to every believer, strong or weak, but is always in proportion to the degree of his faith. “How faith,” says the illustrious Boston, “can grow in any to a full assurance, if there be no assurance in the nature of it, I cannot comprehend.”

“Those who deny the assurance of faith, appear to labour under a mistake, both as to the gospel and as to believing. The gospel does not consist of general doctrines merely; but also of promises indefinitely proposed to all who hear it; to be enjoyed, not on the condition of believing, but in the way of believing. ‘I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions, for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins.’ ‘I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean.’ ‘I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts.’ ‘Behold, I bring you glad tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.’ Can a person believe these promises, truly and with understanding, without having some assurance of the blessings promised? There appears also to be a mistake as to the nature of faith, and the place which it holds in the application of redemption. It is a trusting in Christ, a relying upon him for salvation upon the ground of the divine testimony respecting him; and does not this always imply some degree of assurance or confidence?

“Others go to an opposite extreme. They maintain, that every true Christian always enjoys an absolute and unwavering certainty as to his final happiness—that he is a true believer, and in a state of salvation; and they dwell on the assurance of faith, to the neglect of the evidence which arises from Christian experience and growth in holiness. This is apt to cherish a spirit of presumption, on the one hand, and to throw persons into a state of despondency, on the other. There are various degrees of assurance, and in some genuine believers it may be scarcely perceptible. He who is the author and finisher of our faith, was careful not to break the bruised reed, or quench the smoking flax. While he rebuked the unbelief and unreasonable doubts of his disciples, he never called in question the reality of their faith. He received the man who said, “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.” While he said to Peter, “O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?” he took him by the hand and lifted him out of the water. Grant that doubting is sinful; is there a just man on earth that doeth good and sinneth not? Are not the love and patience, and other gracious dispositions of a Christian, also sinfully defective? Urge the admonition, “Be not faithless, but believing;” but neglect not to urge also, “Be ye holy, for I am holy.” “Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect.” Would it not be dangerous to the interest of holiness, and discreditable to religion, if a person were supposed to be in possession of perfect assurance, while subject to imperfection in every other respect? Is there not a proportional growth in all the members of the spiritual man? Would he not otherwise be a monstrous creature? Or is the exploded doctrine of sinless perfection in this life to be revived among us? He whose faith is faultless, and his assurance perfect and unvarying, sees Christ as he is, and is already completely like him. He would not be a fit inhabitant of earth; and the only prayer he could put up would be, “Now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace.”
Chapter 15 - Of Repentance Unto Life

(15.1 Repentance is a Gospel gift and needs to be preached as much as faith)

15.1 Repentance unto life is an evangelical grace, the doctrine whereof is to be preached by every minister of the gospel, as well as that of faith in Christ.

Commentary:

J.I. Packer says:

“The New Testament word for repentance means changing one’s mind so that one’s views, values, goals, and ways are changed and one’s whole life is lived differently. The change is radical, both inwardly and outwardly; mind and judgment, will and affections, behavior and lifestyle, motives and purposes, are all involved. Repenting means starting to live a new life.

“The call to repent was the first and fundamental summons in the preaching of John the Baptist (Matt. 3:2), Jesus (Matt. 4:17), the Twelve (Mark 6:12), Peter at Pentecost (Acts 2:38), Paul to the Gentiles (Acts 17:30; 26:20), and the glorified Christ to five of the seven churches in Asia (Rev. 2:5, 16; 3:3, 19). It was part of Jesus’ summary of the gospel that was to be taken to the world (Luke 24:47). It corresponds to the constant summons of the Old Testament prophets to Israel to return to the God from whom they had strayed (e.g., Jer. 23:22; 25:4-5; Zech. 1:3-6). Repentance is always set forth as the path to remission of sins and restoration to God’s favor, impenitence as the road to ruin (e.g., Luke 13:1-8).

“Repentance is a fruit of faith, which is itself a fruit of regeneration. But in actual life, repentance is inseparable from faith, being the negative aspect (faith is the positive aspect) of turning to Christ as Lord and Savior. The idea that there can be saving faith without repentance, and that one can be justified by embracing Christ as Savior while refusing him as Lord, is a destructive delusion. True faith acknowledges Christ as what he truly is, our God-appointed king as well as our God-given priest, and true trust in him as Savior will express itself in submission to him as Lord also. To refuse this is to seek justification through an impenitent faith, which is no faith.

“In repentance, says the Westminster Confession, a sinner, out of the sight and sense not only of the danger, but also the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, as contrary to the holy nature, and righteous law of God; and upon the apprehension of his mercy in Christ to such as are penitent; so grieves for, and hates his sins, as to turn from them all unto God, purposing and endeavoring to walk with him in all ways of his commandments. (XV.2)

“This statement highlights the fact that incomplete repentance, sometimes called “attrition” (remorse, self-reproach, and sorrow for sin generated by fear of punishment, without any wish or resolve to forsake sinning) is insufficient. True repentance is “contrition,” as modeled by David in Psalm 51, having at its heart a serious purpose of sinning no more but of living henceforth a life that will show one’s repentance to be full and real (Luke 3:8; Acts 26:20). Repenting of any vice means going in the opposite direction, to practice the virtues most directly opposed to it.”

Rowland Ward says: “True repentance is not produced merely by the terrors of God’s law working on the conscience (as has been held by some) but it is a grace wrought by the gospel and thus involves both the terrors of the law and the persuasions of grace. It should be noted that repentance is not merely a change of mind but it is a change of heart. While repentance is not the instrumental grace of salvation, it is inseparably linked with faith, which is. Hence, repentance is absolutely necessary. A preacher is not to rest content with preaching the necessity of faith without emphasis on the necessity of repentance. Note how Scripture sometimes speaks of the one thing needful to salvation being repentance (eg. Acts 2:38) and at other times faith (eg. Acts 16:31). The weakness of much Christianity is due to weakness in preaching the doctrine of repentance.”
Chapter 15 - Of Repentance Unto Life

November 8

(15.2 The Gospel Warrants and Nature of Repentance)

15.2 By it, a sinner, out of the sight and sense not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, as contrary to the holy nature, and righteous law of God; and upon the apprehension of his mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, so grieves for, and hates his sins, as to turn from them all unto God, purposing and endeavoring to walk with him in all the ways of his commandments.

Commentary:

Ward says of the above passage: “This section shows the two factors involved in true repentance. The actual experience of repentance will vary depending on the temperament of the individual, his course of life - whether marked by many flagrant sins or otherwise - and the clarity of his sense of the sinfulness of sin. The claim that all must experience a crisis conversion is contrary to Scripture and the facts of experience.” He outlines the whole chapter this way:

**ANALYSIS WCF 15:1-6**

1. Repentance in relation to faith
   a. an evangelical grace
   b. a sister grace to faith

2. The nature of repentance
   a. a true sense of sin leading to penitence
   b. a grasping of God’s mercy in Christ

3-4. The necessity of repentance
   a. is not meritorious means of salvation
   b. is that without which there is no justifying faith
   c. to reject it is to destroy oneself

5-6. The practice of repentance
   a. requires thoroughness: general and particular
   b. requires confession
      - privately to God
      - privately or publicly to other believers
   c. restitution evidences reality
   d. the penitent to be received in love

Shaw astutely observes: “True repentance flows from an apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ to such as are penitent. Had we reason to regard God as an inexorable judge, we might, like Adam, attempt to flee from his presence, and escape the sword of his avenging justice; but never would we return to him as sincere penitents. Blessed be God! we have the firmest grounds on which to rest our faith of his pardoning mercy. . . . Of so generous a nature is evangelical repentance, that the penitent soul is never so deeply humbled and grieved for sin, as when it has reason to hope that a gracious God has freely forgiven it.

“With regard to the order of faith and repentance, it may be remarked, that we can form no conception of a moment of time when the one exists in the soul separate from the other. In point of time, then, faith and repentance necessarily accompany each other; but in the order of nature, faith must precede repentance. Evangelical repentance is a turning from sin to God; but there can be no turning to God, except through Christ; and no coming to Christ, but by believing in him.”

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Chapter 15 - Of Repentance Unto Life  

(15.3 Repentance cannot atone for sin, but it is necessary for salvation)  

15.3 Although repentance be not to be rested in, as any satisfaction for sin, or any cause of the pardon thereof, which is the act of God's free grace in Christ; yet it is of such necessity to all sinners, that none may expect pardon without it.

Commentary:

Shaw says: 1. In opposition to the Romanists, who make satisfaction one of the essential parts of repentance, and conceive that certain acts or penances, performed by an offender, constitute a compensation for his transgression, in consideration of which it is forgiven; and also in opposition to Socinians, who deny the atonement for sin by the death of Christ, and maintain that repentance is the only atonement required; our Confession asserts, that repentance is not to be rested in as any satisfaction for sin, or a cause of the pardon thereof. It has already been shown, that it must always be the duty of every sinner to repent; now, the discharge of a present duty can never atone for past crimes. Repentance is never supposed to be a legal ground for remitting the punishment due to crimes committed against a civil State. How unreasonable, then, to suppose that it can form a sufficient ground for the pardon of sin as committed against God! Christ has fully satisfied the justice of God by the sacrifice of himself, and his blood alone cleanseth us from all sin—1 John i. 7. To us the pardon of sin is wholly gratuitous—"an act of God's free grace in Christ"—and, if it be of grace, then it is no more of works; and, therefore, not by repentance, as a satisfaction for sin.

“2. True repentance and pardon are inseparably connected. Though no one is pardoned for his repentance, yet repentance is of such indispensable necessity, that an impenitent sinner cannot be a pardoned sinner. "They are connected in the economy of salvation, not as cause and effect, but to show the consistency of a gratuitous pardon with the interests of holiness. For any government to acquit a criminal, and restore him to society without some evidence of a change of disposition, would be little else than granting him a license to commit crimes with impunity. But if this would be unworthy of a human, how much more of the divine government! God, for the vindication of the honour of the plan of mercy, has so connected pardon with repentance and confession—the expression of repentance—that they are the only certain evidences that we are in a pardoned state; while pardon and repentance are equally the gift of God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Rowland Ward says: "Repentance does not atone for sin or propitiate God. Rather, it is the path along which God brings his elect to trust in him. None should presume and none should despair on account of his sins. While all manner of sin may be forgiven, persistence in unbelief is a sin not only against the command of God in the Gospel but a sin for which there is no remedy.”

Hodge says: "Repentance is not to be rested in, as any satisfaction for sin, or any cause of the pardon thereof. This directly contradicts the opinion of Socinians, the advocates of the moral-influence theory of the atonement, and Rationalists generally, to the effect that the repentance of the sinner is the only satisfaction the law requires, and hence the only condition God demands, as prerequisite to full pardon and restoration to divine favor.

“It also contradicts the Roman doctrine of penance. Romanists distinguish penance-(1) As a virtue, which is internal, including sorrow for sin and a turning from sin unto God. (2) As a sacrament, which is the external expression of the internal state. This sacrament consists of (a) Contrition-i.e., sorrow and detesting of past sins, with a purpose of sinning no more; (b) Confession or self-accusation to a priest having jurisdiction and the power of the keys; (c) Satisfaction or some painful work, imposed by the priest and performed by the penitent, to satisfy divine justice for sins committed; and (d) Absolution, pronounced by the priest judicially, and not merely declaratively. They hold that the element of satisfaction included in this sacrament makes a real satisfaction for sin, and is an efficient cause of pardon, absolutely essential—the only means whereby the pardon of sins committed after baptism can be secured. (Cat. Rom., part 2., ch. 5., qs. 12, 13.)"
15.4 As there is no sin so small, but it deserves damnation; so there is no sin so great, that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent.

Commentary:
Every sin, because it comes from a heart that has in the very act of sinning chosen to worship self and pleasure, rather than worship God, serves eternal condemnation. Every sin is an act of rebellion against our loving and good and wise and kind Creator. Every sin is an act of exalting ourselves as “god” over Him. Every sin is an act of saying “I want to be god.” Consequently every sin deserves damnation, or to put it more bluntly, we deserve damnation, and even the smallest sins prove it!

On the other hand, no sin is so great that it can separate us from God eternally, if we truly repent. Our hymns ask us to sing about this truth all the time. Think of “To God Be the Glory.” The second stanza says:

O perfect redemption, the purchase of blood!
To ev’ry believer the promise of God,
The vilest offender who truly believes,
that moment from Jesus forgiveness receives.

Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, let the earth hear his voice!
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, let the people rejoice!
O come to the Father through Jesus the Son,
And give him the glory, great things he has done!

Shaw says: “In opposition, on the one hand, to the Church of Rome, which holds that some sins are mortal, and others venial - that is, of so trifling a nature, that they may be expiated by some temporal infliction—our Confession asserts, that “there is no sin so small but it deserves damnation;” and, on the other hand, in opposition to certain Anabaptists, and some others, who have held that if persons, after baptism and grace received, fall into grievous sins, there is no pardon remaining for them, even though they should repent, our Confession asserts, that "there is no sin so great that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent.” We admit that a great variety in the degree of guilt attaches to different sins; but we maintain that every sin is worthy of death. Most explicit are the declarations of an inspired apostle: "The wages of sin is death."—Rom. vi. 23. "Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them."—Gal. iii. 10. Both these texts are unquestionably applicable to sin of every kind. The chief of sinners, however, may obtain mercy; and those who, after grace received, have fallen into grievous sins, may truly repent, and obtain forgiveness. David, after his "great transgression," and Peter, after his denial of his Master, repented and were pardoned.—2 Sam. xii. 13; John xxi. 19.”

Hodge says: "That the least sin deserves punishment is obvious. The moral law is moral in every element, and it is of the essence of that which is moral that it is obligatory, and that its violation is deserving of reprobation. Hence "whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, is guilty of all." (James 2:10.) That there is no sin so great that it can bring condemnation upon those that truly repent is also evident, because true repentance, as we have seen, is the fruit of regeneration, and no man is regenerated who is not also justified. Besides, true repentance includes faith, and faith unites to Christ and secures the imputation of his righteousness, and the righteousness of Christ of course cancels all possible sin. (Rom. 8:1; 5:20.)."
Chapter 15 - Of Repentance Unto Life

November 11

(15.5 Our sins need to be repented of specifically)

15.5 Men ought not to content themselves with a general repentance, but it is every man's duty to endeavor to repent of his particular sins, particularly.

Commentary:

Hodge says: "That men ought to repent not only in general of the corruption of their hearts and sinfulness of their lives, but also of every particular sinful action of which they are conscious, and that when possible they should redress the wrong done by their actions, is a dictate alike of natural conscience and scripture. (Luke 19:8; 1 John 1:9.) No man has any right to presume that he hates sin in general unless he practically hates every sin in particular; and no man has any right to presume that he is sorry for and ready to renounce his own sins in general unless he is conscious of practically renouncing and grieving for each particular sin into which he falls."

Shaw says: No man can reckon up all his sins in order; for "who can understand his errors?" But it is not enough to acknowledge in general terms that we are sinners; we should, by a strict and impartial examination of our hearts and ways, endeavour to obtain a discovery of those particular sins by which we have offended and dishonoured God, and should "mourn, every one for his iniquity." Thus, when David was brought to the exercise of true repentance, he not only acknowledged in general that he had sinned, but he had his eye upon that particular sin by which he had in a special manner dishonoured God: "My sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight."—Ps. li. 3, 4. "I will declare mine iniquity; I will be sorry for my sin."—Ps. xxxviii. 18.

Ward says: "Too many are content with a general acknowledgment: 'I don't claim to be perfect; I've done some wrong things in my time.' This is inadequate for it has the implication that I am not so bad after all, and that I think God will accept me on that ground. True repentance leads us to recognise the basic corruption of our nature and the necessity of re-creative grace (Ps 51:5, 10). 'True repentance is no mere external thing. It does not essentially consist in lopping off, but in rooting out; not in reforming the sinful life, but in removing the sinful heart. Thoroughness in repentance, however, can only follow that hatred of the sinful principle which renders one jealous of every single manifestation thereof.' (John Macpherson) The recognition of particular sins and repentance of them will teach us humility and lead to dependence on God's grace."

Psalm 51 gives us a wonderful example of specific repentance. The Psalter of 1912 renders it this way.

1. God, be merciful to me; On Thy grace I rest my plea Plenteous in compassion Thou, Blot out my transgressions now; Wash me, make me pure within; Cleanse, O cleanse me from my sin. 4. Broken, humbled to the dust By Thy wrath and judgment just, Let my contrite heart rejoice, And in gladness hear Thy voice: From my sins O hide Thy face, Blot them out in boundless grace.

2. My transgressions I confess; Grief and guilt my soul oppress. I have sinned against Thy grace, And provoked Thee to Thy face. I confess Thy judgement just; Speechless, I Thy mercy trust. 5. Gracious God, my heart renew, Make my spirit right and true. Cast me not away from Thee, Let Thy Spirit dwell in me; Thy salvation's joy impart, Steadfast make my willing heart.

3. I am evil, born in sin; Thou desirest truth within. Thou alone my Savior art, Teach Thy wisdom to my heart; Make me pure, Thy grace bestow, Wash me whiter than the snow. 6. Sinners then shall learn from me, And return, O God, to Thee Savior all my guilt remove, And my tongue shall sing Thy love; Touch my silent lips, O Lord, And my mouth shall praise accord.
Chapter 15 - Of Repentance Unto Life  

November 12  

(15.6 Repentance and the need for private and public confession)  

15.6 As every man is bound to make private confession of his sins to God, praying for the pardon thereof; upon which, and the forsaking of them, he shall find mercy: so, he that scandalizeth his brother, or the church of Christ, ought to be willing, by a private or public confession, and sorrow for his sin, to declare his repentance to those that are offended, who are thereupon to be reconciled to him, and in love to receive him.  

Commentary:  
Ward says: “All sins need appropriate confession. ... The Bible teaches confession to God through Jesus Christ our great High Priest, and confession to others in a public or private way depending on the circumstances. Those believers who have been wronged by our sins are bound to receive us in love when the wrong is repented of and that loving reception is itself a factor in furthering our sanctification. Genuine repentance is shown by appropriate restitution.”  

Hodge says, “This section teaches: 1. That every man should make private confession of all his sins to God, and that God will certainly pardon him when his sorrow and his renunciation of his sins are sincere. “If we confess our sins, he (God) is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9.)  

“2. That when a Christian has personally injured a brother, or scandalized by his unchristian conduct the Church of Christ, he ought to be willing, by a public or a private confession, as the case may be, to declare his repentance to those that are offended, is also a dictate alike of natural reason and of Scripture. If we have done wrong, we stand in the position of one maintaining a wrong until, by an expressed repentance and, where possible, redress of the wrong, we place ourselves on the side of the right. The wrong-doer is plainly in debt to the man he has injured, to make every possible restitution to his feelings and interests; and the same principle holds true in relation to the general interests of the Christian community. The duty is expressly commanded in Scripture. (Matt. 5:23,24; James 5:16; Matt. 18:15-18.)  

“3. That it is the duty of the brethren, or of the Church, when offended, to forgive the offending party and restore him fully to favor upon his repentance, is also a dictate of natural conscience and of Scripture. All honorable men feel themselves bound to act upon this principle. The Christian is, in addition, brought under obligations to forgive others by his own infinite obligation to his Lord, who not only forgave us upon repentance, but died to redeem us while we were unrepentant. As to public scandals, the Church is bound to forgive them when the Lord has done so. As genuine repentance is the gift of Christ, its evident exercise is a certain indication that the person exercising it is forgiven by Christ and is a Christian brother. (Luke 17:3,4; 2 Cor. 2:7,8; Matt. 6:12.)  

“The Roman Catholic Church has historically taught that, as an element of penance and evidence of true repentance, the Christian must confess all his sins without reserve, in all their details and qualifying circumstances, to a priest having jurisdiction; and that if any mortal sin is unconfessed it is not forgiven; and if the omission is willful, it is sacrilege, and greater guilt is incurred. (Cat. Rom., part 2., ch. 5., qs. 33, 34, 42.) And they maintain that the priest absolves judicially, not merely declaratively, from all the penal consequences of the sins confessed, by the authority of Jesus Christ.  

“This is an obvious perversion of the Scriptural command to confess. They bid us simply to confess our faults one to another. There is not a word said about confession to a priest in the Bible. The believer, on the contrary, has immediate access to Christ, and to God through Christ (1 Tim. 2:5; John 14:6; 5:40; Matt. 11:28), and is commanded to confess his sins immediately to God. (1 John 1:9.) No priestly function is ever ascribed to the Christian ministry in the New Testament. The power of absolute forgiveness of sin belongs to God alone (Matt. 9:26), is incommunicable in its very nature, and has never been granted to any class of men as a matter of fact. The authority to bind or loose which Christ committed to his Church was understood by the apostles, as is evident from their practice, as simply conveying the power of declaring the conditions on which God pardons sin; and, in accordance with that declaration, of admitting or of excluding men from sealing ordinances.”
Chapter 16 - Of Good Works

(16.1 Only God gets to define what good works are)

16.1 Good works are only such as God hath commanded in his holy Word, and not such as, without the warrant thereof, are devised by men, out of blind zeal, or upon any pretense of good intention.

Commentary:

Of 16.1, Rowland Ward says: “Saul of Tarsus thought he was serving God when he persecuted the early Christians, and multitudes have grievously sinned by mistaking a prejudiced understanding of the Scriptures for the truth. One sees it in the traditions the Pharisees laid upon the people, and the same feature has infected Christendom to a marked degree. Others suppose that what they consider to be a good intention is sufficient to render an act good in God’s sight. But only what is required by God is truly good before him.”

J.I. Packer says, regarding the whole issue of good works: “In the New Testament, faith (believing trust, or trustful belief, based on testimony received as from God) is crucially important, for it is the means or instrumental cause of salvation. It is by faith that Christians are justified before God (Rom. 3:26; 4:1-5; Gal. 2:16), live their lives (literally “walk,” 2 Cor. 5:7), and sustain their hope (Heb. 10:35–12:3).

“Faith cannot be defined in subjective terms, as a confident and optimistic mind-set, or in passive terms, as acquiescent orthodoxy or confidence in God without commitment to God. Faith is an object-oriented response, shaped by that which is trusted, namely God himself, God’s promises, and Jesus Christ, all as set forth in the Scriptures. And faith is a whole-souled response, involving mind, heart, will, and affections. Older Reformed theology analyzed faith as notitiat (knowledge, i.e., acquaintance with the content of the gospel), plus assensus (“agreement,” i.e., recognition that the gospel is true), plus fiducia (“trust and reliance,” i.e., personal dependence on the grace of Father, Son, and Spirit for salvation, with thankful cessation of all attempts to save oneself by establishing one’s own righteousness: Rom. 4:5; 10:3). Without fiducia there is no faith, but without notitia and assensus there can be no fiducia (Rom. 10:14).

“God’s gift of faith is a fruit of applicatory illumination by the Holy Spirit, and it ordinarily has in it some measure of conscious assurance through the witnessing of the Spirit (Rom. 8:15-17). Calvin defined faith as “a firm and sure knowledge of the divine favor towards us, founded on the truth of a free promise in Christ, and revealed to our minds and sealed on our hearts by the Holy Spirit.”

“Justification by works (things we have done) is the heresy of legalism. Justification, as Luther insisted, is by faith only (“faith apart from observing the law,” Rom. 3:28), because it is in Christ and by Christ only, and depends on what he is as distinct from what we are. But if “good works” (activities of serving God and others) do not follow from our profession of faith, we are as yet believing only from the head, not from the heart: in other words, justifying faith (fiducia) is not yet ours. The truth is that, though we are justified by faith alone, the faith that justifies is never alone. It produces moral fruit; it expresses itself “through love” (Gal. 5:6); it transforms one’s way of living; it begets virtue. This is not only because holiness is commanded, but also because the regenerate heart, of which fiducia is the expression, desires holiness and can find full contentment only in seeking it.

“When James says that faith without works is dead (i.e., a corpse), he is using the word faith in the limited sense of notitia plus assensus, which is how those he addresses were using it. When he says that one is justified by what one does, not by faith alone, he means by “justified” “proved genuine; vindicated from the suspicion of being a hypocrite and a fraud.” James is making the point that barren orthodoxy saves no one (James 2:14-26). Paul would have agreed, and James’s whole letter shows him agreeing with Paul that faith must change one’s life. Paul denounces the idea of salvation by dead works; James rejects salvation by dead faith.

“Though the believer’s works do not merit salvation and always have something imperfect about them (Rom. 7:13-20; Gal. 5:17), in their character as expressions of the love and fidelity that faith calls forth they are the basis on which God promises rewards in heaven (Phil. 3:12-14; 2 Tim. 4:7-8). For God thus to reward us according to our works is, as Augustine noted, his gracious crowning of his own gracious gifts.”
Chapter 16 - Of Good Works

(16.2 Good works are the evidence of faith, not the proof of legalism!)

16.2 These good works, done in obedience to God’s commandments, are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith: and by them believers manifest their thankfulness, strengthen their assurance, edify their brethren, adorn the profession of the gospel, stop the mouths of the adversaries, and glorify God, whose workmanship they are, created in Christ Jesus thereunto, that, having their fruit unto holiness, they may have the end, eternal life.

Commentary:

Ward says: “All who take the name Christian (except antinomians) believe in the necessity of good works but not all put them in the right place. Good works are fruits of a right relationship not means of establishing it. Their uses are here helpfully stated.”

J.I. Packer explains the difference between the good works to which Christians ought to aspire and the basis for their doing so, in contrast to legalism, here: “The New Testament views Christian obedience as the practice of “good deeds” (works). Christians are to be “rich in good deeds” (1 Tim. 6:18; cf. Matt. 5:16; Eph. 2:10; 2 Tim. 3:17; Titus 2:7, 14; 3:8, 14). A good deed is one done (a) according to the right standard (God’s revealed will, i.e., his moral law); (b) from a right motive (the love to God and others that marks the regenerate heart); (c) with a right purpose (pleasing and glorifying God, honoring Christ, advancing his kingdom, and benefiting one’s neighbor).

Legalism is a distortion of obedience that can never produce truly good works. Its first fault is that it skews motive and purpose, seeing good deeds as essentially ways to earn more of God’s favor than one has at the moment. Its second fault is arrogance. Belief that one’s labor earns God’s favor begets contempt for those who do not labor in the same way. Its third fault is lovelessness in that its self-advancing purpose squeezes humble kindness and creative compassion out of the heart.

In the New Testament we meet both Pharisaic and Judaizing legalism. The Pharisees thought that their status as children of Abraham made God’s pleasure in them possible, and that their formalized daily law-keeping, down to minutest details, would make it actual. The Judaizers viewed Gentile evangelism as a form of proselytizing for Judaism; they believed that the Gentile believer in Christ must go on to become a Jew by circumcision and observance of the festal calendar and ritual law, and that thus he would gain increased favor with God. Jesus attacked the Pharisees; Paul, the Judaizers.

The Pharisees were formalists, focusing entirely on the externals of action, disregarding motives and purposes, and reducing life to mechanical rule-keeping. They thought themselves faithful law-keepers although (a) they majored in minors, neglecting what matters most (Matt. 23:23-24); (b) their casuistry negated the law’s spirit and aim (Matt. 15:3-9; 23:16-24); (c) they treated traditions of practice as part of God’s authoritative law, thus binding consciences where God had left them free (Mark 2:16–3:6; 7:1-8); (d) they were hypocrites at heart, angling for man’s approval all the time (Luke 20:45-47; Matt. 6:1-8; 23:2-7). Jesus was very sharp with them on these points.

In Galatians, Paul condemns the Judaizers’ “Christ-plus” message as obscuring and indeed denying the all-sufficiency of the grace revealed in Jesus (Gal. 3:1-3; 4:21; 5:2-6). In Colossians, he conducts a similar polemic against a similar “Christ-plus” formula for “fullness” (i.e., spiritual completion: Col. 2:8-23). Any “plus” that requires us to take action in order to add to what Christ has given us is a reversion to legalism and, in truth, an insult to Christ.

So far, then, from enriching our relationship with God, as it seeks to do, legalism in all its forms does the opposite. It puts that relationship in jeopardy and, by stopping us focusing on Christ, it starves our souls while feeding our pride. Legalistic religion in all its forms should be avoided like the plague.
Chapter 16 - Of Good Works

(16.3 The source of our obedience is the Holy Spirit, but we are not passive in sanctification)

16.3 Their ability to do good works is not at all of themselves, but wholly from the Spirit of Christ. And that they may be enabled thereunto, beside the graces they have already received, there is required an actual influence of the same Holy Spirit, to work in them to will, and to do, of his good pleasure: yet are they not hereupon to grow negligent, as if they were not bound to perform any duty unless upon a special motion of the Spirit; but they ought to be diligent in stirring up the grace of God that is in them.

Commentary:
Ward says: “These sections (16.3-5) show that whatever good believers are enabled to do all praise belongs to God. It is the Spirit who empowers believers (section 3) yet remaining sin means their works are imperfect in this life (section 4). These two points are repeated in Section 5. Section 4 has in view the treasury of merit teaching of the Church of Rome, which led to the dispensing of indulgences. But no believer can do more than is required and there is no scriptural authority for the notion of a store of surplus merit on which weaker believers may draw to make up their deficiencies. Further, the idea that the duties of everyday life are less worthy than the duty of fulfilling a monastic vow voluntarily taken is also unscriptural. It already presupposes the erroneous idea that it is possible to do more than is required.”

Hodge says: “As we have seen under chapter x., in regeneration the Holy Spirit implants a permanent holy principle or habit in the soul, which ever continues the germ or seed from which all gracious affections and holy exercises do proceed. In respect to the implantation of this permanent holy principle by the Holy Spirit the soul is passive. But, the instant this new moral disposition or tendency is implanted in the soul, as a matter of course the moral character of its exercises is changed, and the soul becomes active in good works, as before it had, been in evil ones. But, as we also saw under chapter xiii., sanctification is a work of God’s free grace, wherein he continues graciously to sustain, nourish, and guide the exercise of the permanent habit of grace which he had implanted in regeneration. The regenerated man depends upon the continued indwelling, the prompting, and the sustaining and the enabling power of the Holy Spirit, in every act of obedience in the exercise of grace; nevertheless as the acts of obedience to the performance of which the Spirit prompts and enables him are his own acts, it follows that he, while seeking the guidance and support of grace, must actively co-operate with it, acting, like every free agent, under the influence of motives and a sense of personal responsibility. Hence this section asserts: --

1. That the ability of the Christian to do good works is not at all from himself, but wholly from the Spirit of Christ.

2. That in order thereto, in addition to the grace implanted in regeneration, there is needed a continual influence of the Holy Ghost upon all the faculties of the renewed soul, whereby the Christian is enabled to will and to do of his good pleasure.

3. That this doctrine of the absolute dependence of the soul is not to be perverted into an occasion to indolence, or to abate in any degree our sense of personal obligation. God’s will is exhibited to us objectively in the written Word. The obligation to voluntary obedience binds our consciences. The Holy Spirit does not work independently of the Word, but through the Word; nor does he work irrespectively of our constitutional faculties of reason, conscience, and free will, but through them. It hence follows that we can never honour the Holy Spirit by waiting for his special motions, but that we always yield to and co-work with him when we, while seeking his guidance and assistance, use all the means of grace, and all our own best energies, in being and doing all that the law of God requires. It is never the waiters for grace, but always the active seekers for grace and doers of his word, whom God approves. Luke xi. 19-13; James i. 22, 23.
Chapter 16 - Of Good Works
November 16

(16.4 However obedient we are in this life, we can’t do more than we are required, and in fact do we do far less)

16.4 They who, in their obedience, attain to the greatest height which is possible in this life, are so far from being able to supererogate, and to do more than God requires, as that they fall short of much which in duty they are bound to do.

Commentary:
Hodge says: “These sections (16.4-6) teach: –
1. That works of supererogation are so far from being possible, even for the most eminent saint, that in this life it is not possible for the most thoroughly sanctified one fully to discharge all his positive obligations.
2. That, for several reasons assigned, the best works of believers, so far from meriting either the pardon of sin or eternal life at the hands of God, cannot even endure the scrutiny of his holy judgment.
3. That, nevertheless, the works of sincere believers are, like their persons, in spite of their imperfections, accepted because of their union with Christ Jesus, and rewarded for his sake.

1. The phrase “supererogation” means “more than is demanded.” Works of supererogation are in their own nature impossible under the moral law of God. In man’s present state even the most eminent saint is incapable of fully discharging all his obligations — much more, of course, of surpassing them. The Romish Church teaches the ordinary Arminian theory of perfectionism. In addition to this error, they teach, (a.) that good works subsequent to baptism merit increase of grace and eternal felicity (Council of Trent, sess. vi., ch. xvi., can. 24, 32);. and (b.) they distinguish between the commands and the counsels of Christ. The former are binding upon all classes of the people, and their observance necessary in order to salvation. The latter, consisting of advice, not of commands — such as celibacy, voluntary poverty, obedience to monastic rule, etc. -- are binding only on those who voluntarily assume them, seeking a higher degree of perfection and a more exalted reward.

We have already, under chapter xiii., seen that a state of sinless perfection is never attained by Christians in this life; and it, of course, follows that much less is it possible for any to do more than is commanded.

That works of supererogation are always and essentially impossible to all creatures in all worlds is also evident — (1.) From the very nature of the moral law. That which is right under any relation is intrinsically obligatory upon the moral agent standing in that relation. If it be moral, it is obligatory. If it be not obligatory, it is not moral. If it is not moral, it is, of course, of no moral value or merit. If it is obligatory, it is not supererogatory. When men do what it is their duty to do, they are to claim nothing for it. Luke xvii. 10. (2.) The doing of that which God has not made it man’s duty to do -- all manner of will-worship and commandments of men -- God declares is an abomination to him. Col. ii. 18 -- 23 1 Tim. iv. 3 Matt. xv. 9. (3) Christ has given no “counsels,” as distinct from his commands. His absolute and universal command to love God with the whole soul, and our neighbor as ourselves, covers the whole ground of possible ability or opportunity on earth or in heaven. Matt. xxii. 37 -- 40. (4.) Increase of grace and eternal felicity, and all else which the believer needs or is capable of, is secured for him by the purchase of Christ’s blood, and either given freely now without price, or is reserved for him in that eternal inheritance which he is to receive as a joint-heir with Christ. (5.) The working of the Romish system of celibacy, voluntary poverty, and monastic vows, has produced such fruits as prove the principle on which they rest radically immoral and false.

2. The best works of believers, instead of meriting pardon of sin and eternal life, cannot endure the scrutiny of God’s holy judgment. The reasons for this assertion are -- (1.) As above shown, from the nature of the moral law. What is not obligatory is not moral, and what is not moral can have no moral desert. (2.) The best works possible for man are infinitely unworthy to be compared in value with God’s favour, and the rewards which men who trust to works seek to obtain through them. (3.) God’s infinite superiority to us, his absolute proprietorship in us as our Maker, and sovereignty over us as our moral Governor, necessarily exclude the possibility of our actions deserving any reward at his hand. No action of ours can profit God or lay him under obligation to us. All that is possible to us is already a debt we owe him as our Creator and Preserver. When we have done our utmost we are only unprofitable servants. Much less, then, can any possible obedience at one moment atone for any disobedience in another moment. (4.) As already proved under chapter xiii., on Sanctification, our works, which could merit nothing even if perfect, are in this life, because of remaining imperfections, most imperfect. They therefore, the best of them, need to be atoned. for by the blood, and presented through the mediation, of Christ, before they can find acceptance with the Father.
Chapter 16 - Of Good Works

(16.5 Our good works cannot merit forgiveness because of [1] the asymmetry between them and heaven, [2] they are the result of the Spirit's work in us, [3] they are all mixed with sin)

16.5 We cannot by our best works merit pardon of sin, or eternal life at the hand of God, by reason of the great disproportion that is between them and the glory to come; and the infinite distance that is between us and God, whom, by them, we can neither profit, nor satisfy for the debt of our former sins, but when we have done all we can, we have done but our duty, and are unprofitable servants: and because, as they are good, they proceed from his Spirit; and as they are wrought by us, they are defiled, and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection, that they cannot endure the severity of God's judgment.

Commentary:

Shaw says: "This section is also directed against an error of the Church of Rome, which teaches that the good works of the saints are meritorious of eternal life. That we cannot, by our best works, merit pardon of sin, or eternal life, at the hand of God, appears from the following considerations:–1. Our Saviour declares (Luke xvii. 10), that when we have done all those things which are commanded us, we are unprofitable servants, and have only done that which was our duty. 2. Our best works cannot be profitable to God, and therefore can merit nothing at his hand.—Ps. xvi. 2. 3. All our works, as they are good, proceed from the almighty agency of the Spirit of grace (Phil. ii. 13); and as they are not performed in our own strength, they can merit no reward. 4. Our best works, as they are wrought by us, have such a mixture of sin in them, that, instead of meriting anything at the hand of God, they cannot endure the severity of God's judgment. –Ps. cxliii. 2. 5. Our best works bear no proportion to the inestimable blessing of eternal life (2Cor. iv. 17); accordingly, the reward is represented "as of grace, not of debt;" and we are directed to "look for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life." - Jude 21."

Ward outlines this chapter this way:

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Hodge makes an important observation about "merit." He says: "As to the relation of good works to rewards, it may be observed -- (1.) The word "merit," in the strict sense of the term, means that common quality of all actions or services to which a reward is due, in strict justice, on account of their intrinsic value or worthiness. It is evident that, in this strict sense, no work of any creature can in itself merit any reward from God; because -- (a.) All the faculties he possesses were originally granted and are continuously sustained by God, so that he is already so far in debt to God that he can never bring God in debt to him. (b.) Nothing the creature can do can be a just equivalent for the incomparable favour of God and its consequences.

(2.) There is another sense of the word, however, in which it may be affirmed that if Adam had in his original probation yielded the obedience required, he would have "merited" the reward conditioned upon it, not because of the intrinsic value of that obedience, but because of the terms of the covenant which God had graciously condescended to form with him. By nature, the creature owed the Creator obedience, while the Creator owed the creature nothing. But by covenant the Creator voluntarily bound himself to owe the creature eternal life, upon the condition of perfect obedience.

It is evident that in this life the works of God's people can have no merit in either of the senses above noticed. They can have no merit intrinsically, because they are all imperfect, and therefore themselves worthy of punishment rather than of reward. They can have no merit by covenant concession on God's part, because we are not now standing in God's sight in the covenant of works, but of grace, and the righteousness of Christ, received by faith alone, constitutes the sole meritorious ground upon which our salvation, in all of its stages, rests.
16.6 Notwithstanding, the persons of believers being accepted through Christ, their good works also are accepted in him; not as though they were in this life wholly unblamable and unreprovable in God’s sight; but that he, looking upon them in his Son, is pleased to accept and reward that which is sincere, although accompanied with many weaknesses and imperfections.

Commentary:
Here is the flow of argument in this rich section:

1. Our persons are accepted, in and through Christ. That is, as we have believed on Christ and have been united to Christ, we have been accepted by God, in Christ, and we can now call him our Father, in Christ, and he accepts us as his sons, in his Son.

2. Because we are accepted in Christ, our works and obedience are accepted and rewarded in Christ. One of the benefits of Christ’s mediation is that our imperfect good works are accepted as good by God.

3. Our works are not acceptable because they are perfectly guiltless and irreproachable. Our Father’s gracious acceptance of our good works is not fundamentally based on their perfect integrity.

4. Rather, because he always looks at our works in his Son, he accepts our sincere attempts at obedience and righteous, though everything we do is shot through with failings and faults.

Ward says: “The good works of believers are accepted because they themselves have been accepted in and through Christ.”

Shaw says: “This section teaches us that the good works of believers, although not meritorious, are yet accepted of God, through Christ. Here it is only necessary to offer two remarks—1st, That our persons must be accepted, before our works of obedience can be accepted with God. "The Lord had respect unto Abel, and to his offering."—Gen. iv. 4. In accepting of his offering, God testified that he had respect unto his person; i.e., that he esteemed and accounted him righteous.—Heb. xi. 4. 2nd, That the best of our works are not accepted as they are ours, but only upon account of the merit and mediation of Christ. As our persons are "accepted in the Beloved," so our works are only "acceptable to God by Jesus Christ."—1 Pet. ii. 5.”

Hodge says: “In the dispensation of the gospel, the gracious world of the believer and the gracious reward he receives from God are branches from the same gracious root. The same covenant of grace provides at once for the infusion of grace in the heart, the exercise of grace in the life, and the reward of the grace so exercised. It is all of grace -- a grace called a reward added to a grace called a work. The one grace is set opposite to the other grace as a reward, for these reasons: (a.) To act upon us as a suitable stimulus to duty. God promises to reward the Christian just as a father promises to reward his child for doing what is its duty, and what is for its own benefit alone. (b.) Re- cause a certain gracious proportion has been established between the grace given in the reward and the grace given in the holy exercises of the heart and life; but both are alike given for Christ’s sake. This proportion has been established -- the more grace of obedience, the more grace of reward -- the more grace on earth, the more glory in heaven -- because God so wills it, and because the grace given and exercised in obedience prepares the soul for the reception of the further grace given in the reward. Matt. xvi. 27; 1 Cor. iii. 8; 2 Cor. iv. 17.”

J.I. Packer says of future rewards of believers: “There will be different degrees of blessedness and reward in heaven. All will be blessed up to the limit of what they can receive, but capacities will vary just as they do in this world. As for rewards (an area in which present irresponsibility can bring permanent future loss: 1 Cor. 3:10-15), two points must be grasped. The first is that when God rewards our works he is crowning his own gifts, for it was only by grace that those works were done. The second is that essence of the reward in each case will be more of what the Christian desires most, namely, a deepening of his or her love-relationship with the Savior, which is the reality to which all the biblical imagery of honorific crowns and robes and feasts is pointing. The reward is parallel to the reward of courtship, which is the enriching of the love-relationship itself through marriage.
Chapter 16 - Of Good Works

(16.7 Only a child of God is capable of doing a “good work” in this fallen world)

16.7 Works done by unregenerate men, although for the matter of them they may be things which God commands; and of good use both to themselves and others; yet, because they proceed not from an heart purified by faith; nor are done in a right manner, according to the Word; nor to a right end, the glory of God, they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God, or make a man meet to receive grace from God: and yet, their neglect of them is more sinful and displeasing unto God.

Commentary:

Hodge says, "This section teaches: 1. That unregenerate men may perform many actions which, for the matter of them, are such as God commands, and are of good use both to themselves and others. The truth of this is verified in the experience and observation of all men, and we believe it is not called in question by any party.

2. Nevertheless, they are at best, all of them, not only imperfect works, morally considered, but ungodly works religiously considered. They are, therefore, not in the Scriptural sense good works, nor can they satisfy the requirements of God, nor merit grace, nor make the soul fit for the reception of grace.

The distinction is plain between an action in itself considered, and considered in its motives and object. A truly good work is one which springs from a principle of divine love, and has the glory of God as its object and the revealed will of God as its rule. None of the actions of an unregenerate man are of this character.

There is also an obvious distinction between an act viewed in itself abstractly, and the same action viewed in relation to the person performing it and his personal relations. A rebel against sovereign authority may do many amiable things, and many acts of real virtue, as far as his relations to his fellow-rebels are concerned. It is nevertheless true that a rebel, during the whole period of his rebellion, is in every moment of time and every action of his life a rebel with reference to that supreme authority which through all he continues to defy. In this sense the ploughing of the wicked is said to be sin. Prov. xxi. 4. And thus as long as men stay away from Christ, and refuse to submit to the righteousness of God, all their use of the means of grace and all their natural virtues are sins in God's sight.

3. Nevertheless God is more displeased with their neglecting to do these commanded duties at all than he is with their doing them sinfully as sinners. These works done by unregenerate men are commanded by God, and hence are their bounden duties. Their sin lies not in their doing them, but in their personal attitude of rebellion, and in the absence of the proper motives and objects. If they neglected to do them, the neglect would be added to the other grounds of condemnation, which would remain all the same. These ought they to do, but not to leave the weightier matters of the law undone. The amiable acts of a rebel must involve elements of rebellion, and yet he would be more to be condemned without them than with them.

Shaw says: "In concluding this chapter, we would impress upon the reader, that the gospel is "a doctrine according to godliness." "The grace of God, that bringeth salvation, hath appeared to all men; teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world." Nothing but the most deplorable ignorance, or the most determined enmity against the truth, could ever have led men to set the gospel and morality in opposition to each other, or to allege that the doctrine of grace tends to licentiousness. Such men know not what they say, nor whereof they affirm. It is by inculcating morality upon gospel principles that we establish it upon the firmest basis. "Do we make void the law through faith? God forbid; yea, we establish the law." Though good works are excluded from baring any meritorious influence in the matter of salvation, yet, as we have seen, they are of indispensable necessity, and serve many valuable purposes. Let it, therefore, be the study of all who "name the name of Christ" to be "fruitful in good works," that so they may silence the adversaries of the truth, recommend religion to all within the sphere of their influence, glorify their Father who is in heaven, and promote their own comfort and happiness."
Chapter 17 - Of the Perseverance of the Saints

(17.1 True believers always and invariably persevere to the end)

17.1 They, whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.

Commentary:

Shaw says: "The perseverance of the saints is one of the articles by which the creed of the followers of Calvin is distinguished from that of the followers of Arminius. The latter hold, that true believers may fall into sins inconsistent with a state of grace, and may continue in apostasy to the end of life, and consequently may finally fall into perdition. The same doctrine is avowedly supported by the Church of Rome; for the Council of Trent has decreed, that "If any person shall say that a man who has been justified cannot lose grace, and that, therefore, he who falls and sins was never truly justified, he shall be accursed." In opposition to this tenet, our Confession affirms, that true believers "can neither totally nor finally fall away from a state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved." There may seem to be a redundancy of language in this statement; for, if believers cannot fall totally, it follows that they cannot fall finally. Both terms, however, are employed with the utmost propriety. "They are intended to oppose the doctrine of Arminians, who affirm, that although a saint may fall totally from grace, he may be restored by repentance; but that since this is uncertain, and does not always take place, he may also fall finally, and die in his sins. Now, we affirm, that the total apostasy of believers is impossible, not in the nature of things, but by the divine constitution; and, consequently, that no man who has been once received into the divine favour can be ultimately deprived of salvation."

"For the purpose of explaining the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, and obviating objections against it, we offer the following observations, which will be found embodied in the several propositions of our Confession: -

1. The privilege of final perseverance is peculiar to true believers.

"It is restricted in our Confession "to those whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by his Spirit." Many in the visible Church are merely nominal Christians. They are joined to the Church by an external profession; but they are not united to the Head of the Church by the Spirit of grace, and by a living faith. They assume the form of godliness, but are strangers to its power. They may have a name to live, but they are spiritually dead. Now, it is readily granted, that such seeming Christians may finally apostatise. They never knew the grace of God in truth, and may, in a season of trial, discover their real character by open apostasy. They might have splendid profession of religion, and be possessed of eminent gifts, and might thus deceive themselves and impose upon others; but they had not "the root of the matter" in them. And we may assuredly conclude of all those who fall totally and finally away, that they were never really "rooted and grounded in Christ." An inspired apostle declares, concerning such persons: "They went out from us, but they were not of us: for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us; but they went out, that they might be made manifest, that they were not all of us."—1 John ii. 19.

"This enables us to explain the several examples of apostasy mentioned in Scripture, in perfect consistency with the final perseverance of the saints. The story-ground hearers, who received the Word with joy, and afterwards fell away, are expressly said to have had no root in themselves, and so endured only for a while.—Matt. xiii. 21. In Heb. vi. 4-6, some are said to be enlightened, and to have tasted of the heavenly gift, and to be made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and to have tasted the good Word of God, and the powers of the world to come, and yet it is supposed they may fall away and never be restored again; but it is evident, that notwithstanding the high things ascribed to them, they never had the truth of grace, for there are better things, even things that accompany salvation, expressly mentioned (verse 9) in contradistinction to their attainments. Those mentioned by another apostle (2 Pet. ii. 20), who had escaped the pollutions of the world, and were again entangled therein, and overcome, had evidently never experienced a real change of their impure nature, though they had an outward reformation. Such examples, or the fall of such mere professors of religion as Hymeneus, Philetus, and Demas, do not in the least invalidate the doctrine of the final perseverance of true saints.

"It may here be remarked, that as the privilege of perseverance is limited to true believers, so it must be extended to every one of them. If one of them could be lost, this would sap the foundation of the comfort of the whole; for the condition of all would be insecure. Not only those who have a high degree of grace, but all who have true grace, though but like a grain of mustard seed—not only the strong and flourishing, but such as are like "the smoking flax and bruised reed," shall be enabled to "hold on their way" and shall grow stronger and stronger. The same reasons hold for the perseverance of all, as of any who have "obtained like precious faith;" and we must either erase this entirely from the catalogue of the believer's privileges, or maintain that it extends to every one of them."
Chapter 17 - Of the Perseverance of the Saints

(17.2 The Biblical basis of the perseverance of the saints)

17.2 This perseverance of the saints depends not upon their own free will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father; upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ, the abiding of the Spirit, and of the seed of God within them, and the nature of the covenant of grace: from all which ariseth also the certainty and infallibility thereof.

Commentary: Shaw says: “Having explained the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, as it is exhibited in our Confession, the arguments by which it is supported may now be stated. These are arranged, in the second section, in the following order: - 1. The perseverance of the saints is secured by the immutability of the decree of election. That a certain definite number of mankind sinners were, in sovereign mercy, chosen of God, and appointed unto glory, before the foundation of the world, is a truth attested by many express declarations of Scripture.—Eph. i. 4; 2 Thess. ii. 13; Acts xiii. 48. This purpose of God finally to bestow salvation or eternal life upon his chosen, necessarily includes a determination to do all that is requisite to make them meet for the enjoyment of it, and to preserve them amidst all snares and temptations to the full possession of it. Now, if one included in the election of grace should finally perish, the purpose of God would, in that instance, be frustrated, and in every instance in which such an event should take place. But his purpose, originating from himself, and being altogether independent of his creatures, must be unchangeable as his nature. Hence he proclaims, with divine majesty: “I am the Lord; I change not.” “My counsel shall stand, and it will do all my pleasure.” Our Saviour himself, from the election of believers, infers the impossibility of their being seduced into a perishing condition. “There shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders, insomuch that (if it were possible) they shall deceive the very elect.”—Matt. xxiv. 24. It is evident that, in this passage, our Lord treats of the elect after being brought to the knowledge of the truth, and that he speaks not of any seduction whatsoever, but that which is total and final. Now, the words, “If it were possible,” imply a real impossibility of their being so seduced. 2. It is secured by the merit of Christ’s sufferings and death, Christ purchased the Church with his own blood.” The “iniquities” of all his people “were laid upon him,” and, as their Surety, “he bore their sins in his own body on the tree.” He sustained the full infliction of the curse which they deserved, and obtained for them eternal redemption.” “Now, as a surety stands in the room of the person whom he represents, the latter reaps all the benefit of what the surety has done in his name; so that, if his debt has been paid by the surety, the creditor cannot demand the payment of it from him. Let us apply this illustration to the subject before us. If Christ made satisfaction on the cross for the sins of his people—not for some of them only, but for them all, as we are expressly assured—it would be contrary to justice to subject them also to the punishment. But, if the saints may fall from a state of grace, and perish in their sins, satisfaction will be twice exacted - first, from the surety; and secondly, from them. Either Christ did, or did not, make an atonement for the sins of his people. If he did not make an atonement for them, they must satisfy for themselves; if he did answer the demands of justice in their room, it is impossible that, under the righteous administration of Heaven, they should, by any cause, or for any reason, come into condemnation. Accordingly, the new covenant promises to believers complete and irrevocable pardon. I will ‘be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.’ - Heb. viii. 12. But if the doctrine of the defection of the saints is true, the promise is false; for their sins may be remembered again. Nay, if this doctrine is true, Christ might have died in vain; for, as one saint may fall from a state of grace as well as another, it might happen that not a single sinner should be actually redeemed by his blood from everlasting destruction.” 3. It is secured by the perpetuity and prevalence of Christ’s intercession. As Christ purchased his people by the merit of his own blood, so “he ever liveth to make intercession” for them. And what is the matter of his intercession on their behalf? He prays for every one of them, as he did for Peter, “that their faith fail not.” In those petitions which he offered up for his followers, while he was yet on earth, we have a specimen of his pleadings before the throne. Now, he prayed once and again for their preservation: “Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me;” “I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil.”-John xv. 11, 15. “Lest any should confine these petitions to his immediate disciples, or to such as already believed on him, he adds (verse 20): ‘Neither pray for these alone, but for all who shall believe on me through their word.” If, then, there is any efficacy in the intercession of Christ, the perseverance of all who believe on him is infallibly secured. But his intercession, being founded on his satisfactory death and meritorious righteousness, must be prevalent and effectual to obtain for his people all that he asks on their behalf. Him the Father always heareth.—John xi. 42. 4. It is secured by the constant habitation of the Spirit. When our Lord was about to depart out of this world, he consoled the hearts of his disciples by the promise of the Spirit. “I will pray the Father,” said he, “and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever.”-John xiv. 16. That the gift of the Spirit was not peculiar to the apostles, but is the happy privilege of every real Christian, is evident from the inspired declaration: “If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his.”—Rom. viii. 9. Now, the Spirit does not enter into the hearts of believers as a transient visitant, but “to make his abode with them.” Hence they are called “the temple of God, because the Spirit of God dwelleth in them.” And the constant residence of the Spirit in believers effectually secures their perseverance; for his gracious purpose in taking up his residence in them is, to make them meet for the inheritance of the saints in light, to guard them through life, and conduct them to glory. By him they are sealed the day of redemption, and he is the earnest of their future inheritance. - 2 Cor. i. 22; Eph. i. 13, 14. An earnest is a part given as a security for the future possession of the whole; and as the Holy Spirit is to believers the earnest of the heavenly inheritance, this must imply the utmost certainty of their future bliss. If any who have received the Spirit were left to fall totally and finally from a state of grace, and to come short of the heavenly inheritance, then, shocking thought! The Spirit of truth would be a precarious and fallacious earnest. 5. It is secured by the unchangeable nature of the covenant of grace. This covenant, being founded in the grace of God, and not in our obedience, is “ordered in all things, and certainty of the saints’ perseverance could not possibly be expressed in stronger terms.
Chapter 17 - Of the Perseverance of the Saints

(17.3 The doctrine of perseverance is a not a basis for indifference towards ongoing sin)

17.3 Nevertheless, they may, through the temptations of Satan and of the world, the prevalency of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of the means of their preservation, fall into grievous sins; and, for a time, continue therein: whereby they incur God's displeasure, and grieve his Holy Spirit, come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts, have their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded; hurt and scandalize others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves.

Commentary:
Hodge says, “This chapter teaches the following propositions: 1. The true believer, having been once regenerated and justified by God, can never afterward totally nor finally fall away from grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end. 2. That the principle of this certain perseverance is not in any degree in the free will of the saints, but altogether -- (1.) In the inherent immutability of the eternal decree of election; (2.) In the provisions of the eternal covenant of grace; (3.) In the merits and intercession of Christ; and, (4.) In the constant indwelling and preserving power of the Holy Ghost. 3. The true believer may nevertheless fall into grievous sins, and for a time continue therein. The occasions of which falls are -- (1.) The temptations of the world; (2.) The seductions of Satan; (3.) The remaining corruptions of their own nature; (4.) The neglect of the means of grace. The effects of which falls are -- (a.) God is displeased and the Holy Ghost grieved; (b.) They are themselves to a degree deprived of their graces and comforts, their hearts being hardened and their consciences wounded, and their persons visited with temporal judgments; (a.) Their conduct is a stumbling-block to all who see them, and an occasion of sorrow to their fellow-Christians.

It is obvious that adherents of the Arminian and Calvinistic systems must take opposite sides on this question. The Arminian, as we have seen, holds -- (1.) That God elects persons to eternal life only on condition of their voluntary reception of grace and perseverance therein till death, as foreseen by him. (2.) That Christ died to render the salvation of all men indifferently possible, and not as the substitute of certain persons definitely, to discharge all their legal obligations, and to secure for them all the rewards of the covenant. (3.) That all men have the same gracious influence of the Holy Ghost operating upon them, and that the reason why one believes and is regenerated, and that another continues reprobate, is that the former voluntarily cooperates with grace and that the other resists it. Thus, in the personal application of redemption the Arminian makes everything to depend upon the free will of the creature. Since, then, neither the decree of God, nor the atonement of Christ, nor the grace of the Holy Ghost determines the certain salvation of any individual -- since the application and effect of the atonement and of the renewing and sanctifying influences of the Spirit depend, in their view, upon the free will of every man in his own case -- it necessarily follows that the perseverance of any man in the grace once received must also depend entirely upon his own will. And since the human will is essentially fallible and capable of change, and in this life exposed to seduction, it follows, of course, that the believer is at all times liable to total apostasy, and dying in that state, to final perdition. Hence the Romish Church, whose doctrine is purely Arminian, declares in her authoritative Standards: “If any one maintain that a man once justified cannot lose grace, and therefore that he who falls and sins never was truly justified, let him be accursed.” Council of Trent, sess. vi., can. 23.

The Protestant Arminians also hold that it is not only possible, but also a frequent fact, that persons truly regenerate, by neglecting grace and grieving the Holy Spirit with sin, fall away totally, and at length finally, from grace into eternal reprobation. Conf. of the Remonstrants, xi. 7.

The Calvinistic doctrine, as stated in this chapter of our Confession, is, that God has revealed his gracious purpose to cause every true believer to persevere in his faith and obedience till death; that he will never be allowed to fall away totally from grace, and therefore he never can fall away finally.
Chapter 18 - Of the Assurance of Grace and Salvation

November 23

(18.1 True believers may and ought to have a full assurance of salvation in this life)

18.1 Although hypocrites and other unregenerate men may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favor of God, and estate of salvation (which hope of theirs shall perish); yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before him, may, in this life, be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, which hope shall never make them ashamed.

Commentary:

Shaw say: "By the "assurance of grace and salvation," treated of in his chapter, is meant the believers assurance that he is "in the state of grace," and has a personal interest in the salvation of Christ. The statements on this subject are directed against certain errors of the Church of Rome, and of the Arminians. The Church of Rome denies that it is possible for any man in this life to attain more than a conjectural and probable persuasion of salvation, except by extraordinary revelation; and they build some of the most gainful parts of their traffic upon that perpetual doubt and uncertainty, with respect to their final salvation, in which they keep their votaries, and which they profess in some degree to remove by the prayers of the Church, the merits of saints and martyrs, and the absolution which the priests pronounce in the name of God. The Arminians, in consistency with their denial of the certainty of the saints final perseverance, hold that it is not possible for any man to attain a greater certainty of salvation than this, that, if he shall persevere in the faith to the end, he shall be saved.

"1. In opposition to these errors, our Confession teaches, that the saints, without any special or immediate revelation, in the due use of ordinary means, may attain, not merely a conjectural or probable persuasion, but a certain assurance of their being in a state of grace, and of their final salvation. This is confirmed by such considerations as the following:—1. In the Scriptures, Christians are enjoined to examine themselves, and give all diligence to attain this assurance. The Apostle Paul exhorts the Corinthians to "examine themselves whether they be in the faith," and speaks of it as an argument of something very blameable in them, not to know whether Jesus Christ be in them or not.—2. Cor. xii. 5. The Apostle Peter directs all Christians to "give all diligence to make their calling and election sure", not to others, but to themselves; and informs them how they may do this.—2 Pet. i. 5-11. The exhortation is addressed to them that have "obtained precious faith through the righteousness of God, even our Saviour Jesus Christ;" they are directed to "add to their faith, virtue; and to virtue, knowledge," &c.; and they are informed, that by so doing, they would attain a certain assurance of their calling, and election, and have a certain admission into the everlasting kingdom of God in heaven. This direction is of the same nature with the exhortation of the Apostle Paul to the Hebrews (vi. 11) "We desire that everyone of you do show the same diligence, to the full assurance of hope unto the end." These exhortations make it manifest, that Christian have the means, without any special revelation, of assuring themselves of their present piety and future safety. 2. The Scriptures exhibit many marks or characters of genuine believers, by which they may be certainly assured that they have believed to the saving of their souls. "Hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments." "Whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected; hereby know we that we are in him."—1 John ii. 3, 5. "We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren." "Hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him."—1 John iii. 14, 19. The scope of the whole of that Epistle is, to propose such sure marks to believers, by which they may know "that they have eternal life." - 1 John v. 13. 3. We have many examples of the attainment of this assurance, in the history of the personal experience of the saints. The saints described in Scripture were in the habit of expressing their assurance of salvation. "As for me," said David, "I will behold thy face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness."—Ps. xvi. 15. "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."—Ps. xlviii. 6. "Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory."—Ps. lxxxiii. 24. Job, too, in the midst of his accumulated afflictions, spoke the language of assurance: "I know that my Redeemer liveth," &c. - Job xix. 20. The experience of New Testament believers is still more plainly expressed. The Apostle Paul may serve as an example. These are his triumphant assertions in behalf of all the saints: "We are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."—Rom. viii. 37-39; see also, 2 Cor. v. 1. Upon another occasion he declares his assurance that he had believed in Christ, and his full persuasion of his future felicity: "I know whom I have believed, and I am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day."—2 Tim. i. 12. So confident was he that, when "absent from the body," he should be present with the Lord", that he expresses his willingness, nay, his ardent desire, in consequence of his assurance, to be released from the body, that he might immediately enter upon the heavenly enjoyment: "I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day." - 2 Tim. iv. 6-8; see also 2 Cor. v. 8; Phil. i. 23. These examples must be sufficient to establish the general principle, that an assurance of salvation is in this life attainable by believers.
Chapter 18 - Of the Assurance of Grace and Salvation

November 24

(18.2 Christian certainty is an infallible assurance)

18.2 This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion grounded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God, which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption.

Commentary:

2. That true believers may in this life attain to a certainty with regard to their own personal relations to Christ, and that this certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion founded on a fallible hope, but an infallible assurance of faith, is proved from the fact -- (1.) That it is directly affirmed in Scripture: "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God." Rom. viii. 16. " hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments." 1 John ii. 3. "We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren." 1 John iii. 14. (2.) The attainment of it is commanded as a duty in Scripture. We are exhorted "to shew the same diligence to the full assurance of hope unto the end," (Heb. vi. 11); and to "give diligence to make our calling and election sure, for if we do these things we shall never fall." 2 Pet. i. 10. (3.) There are examples of its attainment by ancient believers recorded in Scripture. Thus Paul: "I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able," etc. "I have fought a good fight,...... I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness," etc. 2 Tim. i. 12; iv. 7, 8; -- and John; 1 John ii. 3; iv. 16. (4.) There have been unquestionable instances in modern times in which sincere Christians have enjoyed a full assurance of their personal salvation, and in which their entire lives have vindicated the genuineness of their faith. The Protestant Reformers as a class were eminent examples of the possession of this assurance. God had qualified them for their great work with an extraordinary measure of this grace. Their controversy with the Romanists also led them to lay great stress upon the duty of this attainment, even going so far as to identify assurance with faith, making it essential to salvation. The Romanists held that faith is mere intellectual assent to the truth, not involving trust; and that hence faith has nothing to do with the judgment any one makes of his own personal salvation; and hence that no one could attain to any certainty upon that point in this life without an extraordinary revelation. Council of Trent, sess. vi., ch. ix. The Reformers, on the other hand, went so far as to teach that the special object of justifying faith is the favour of God toward us for Christ's sake: therefore to believe is to be assured of our own personal salvation. Thus Luther, Melancthon, and Calvin taught. This is the doctrine taught in the Augsburg Confession and Heidelberg Catechism. It is not, however, taught in any other of the Reformed Confessions, and, as will be seen below, is not the Doctrine of our Standards.

3. This infallible assurance of faith rests (1.) upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation. Although it is one thing to be assured that the promise is true, and another thing to be assured of our own personal interest in it; yet assurance of the truth of the promise tends, in connection with a sense of our personal reliance upon it, directly to strengthen our assured hope that it will be fulfilled in our case also. Therefore God confirmed his promise by an oath, " That by two immutable things" (his promise and his oath), " in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us in the gospel " Heb. vi. 18. Thus faith includes trust. Trust rests upon the divine truth of the promises, and in turn supports hope; and the fullness of hope is assurance. This assurance rests (2.) upon the inward evidence of those graces unto which the promises are made. Thus the Scriptures promise that whosoever believes shall have everlasting life. The believer whose faith is vigorous and intelligent has a distinct evidence in his own consciousness that he for one does believe. Hence the conclusion is obvious that he shall have everlasting life. The same promise is given to all who love God, to all who keep his commandments, to all who love the brethren, to the pure in heart, to those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, etc. Hence, when these graces are possessed in such a degree, strength, and purity, that we are conscious of their genuineness, then the conclusion is immediate and irresistible, that we are in union with Christ, and have a right to appropriate the promises to ourselves. This assurance rests (3.) upon the testimony of the Spirit of adoption, witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God. This language is taken from Rom. viii. 16. The sense in which this witnessing of the Holy Spirit to our spirits is to be understood has been much debated among theologians.
Chapter 18 - Of the Assurance of Grace and Salvation

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

Commentary:

Shaw says: "That the assurance that one is in a gracious state does not lifelong to the essence of faith, requires no proof. This assurance arises from the perception of the fruits and evidences of faith; and it is manifest that faith must exist before its evidences can be discerned. All faith is founded on testimony; but there is no testimony in the Scriptures declaring to any man that he is in a state of grace; this, therefore, cannot be object of faith. This kind of assurance, as has been already shown; is ordinarily obtained by reflection, or lay a process of reasoning. But, although the assurance described in this chapter is not essential to faith, yet there is an assurance which belongs to the essence of faith, and this our Confession recognises in the chapter which treats of saving faith. It makes the principal acts of saving faith to consist in “accepting, receiving, and resting” on Christ for salvation; and it is impossible for one to rest on Christ for salvation without believing or trusting that he shall be saved by him. Whoever rest upon a person for doing a certain thing in his favour, must have a persuasion or assurance, that he will do that thing for him. Indeed, assurance is so essential to faith, that without it there can be no faith, human or divine. To believe a report, is to be persuaded or assured of the truth of the report; to believe a promise, is to be persuaded or assured that the promiser will do as he has said. In like manner, to believe in Christ for salvation, is to be persuaded or assured that we shall be saved through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“There are two extremes in reference to this subject, which ought to be avoided. The one is, that there is no assurance in the direct act of faith, and that assurance can only be derived from the marks and evidences of a gracious state; the other is, that the assurance of personal salvation is so essential to saving faith, that no one can be a genuine believer who has any doubts of his own salvation. We apprehend, on the one hand, that while the assurance which arises from marks and evidences of a gracious state does not belong to the essence of faith, yet there is an assurance in the direct act of faith, founded upon nothing about the person himself, but solely upon the Word of God; and, on the other hand, that though there is an assurance essential to faith, yet the believer may be often perplexed with doubts and fears concerning his personal salvation, because there is still much unbelief, and other corruptions, remaining in him, and these frequently prevail against him.

“It will be sufficient briefly to state the other truths contained in these sections.

1. As the assurance of their gracious state is attainable by believers, in the due use of ordinary means, so it is their duty to give diligence, and use their utmost endeavours to obtain it. This is incumbent upon them by the command of God, and it is necessary to their own comfort, though not to their safety.

2. This assurance is not the attainment of all believers; and, after it has been enjoyed, it may be weakened, and even lost for a season. It is liable to be shaken by bodily infirmity, by their own negligence, by temptation, by that visitation of God which the Scriptures call his hiding his face from his people, and by occasional transgression.

3. Although believers may forfeit their assurance, yet they are never entirely destitute of gracious habits and dispositions, nor left to sink into utter despair; and their assurance may, by the operation of the Spirit, be in due time revived.

4. This assurance, instead of encouraging believers to indulge in sin, excites them to the vigorous pursuit of holiness. Such as boast of their assurance, and yet can deliberately practise known sin, are only vain pretenders. True assurance cannot be attained or preserved without close walking with God in all his commandments and ordinances blameless. We must judge of the tendency of the assurance of salvation by what the apostles of our Lord have said concerning it; and they uniformly improve it as a motive to holiness.—Rom. xiii. 11-14; 1 Cor. xv. 58; 1 John iii. 2, 3.”
Chapter 18 - Of the Assurance of Grace and Salvation

(18.4 True believers will sometimes struggle with salvation)

18.4 True believers may have the assurance of their salvation divers ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted; as, by negligence in preserving of it, by falling into some special sin which woundeth the conscience and grieveth the Spirit; by some sudden or vehement temptation, by God's withdrawing the light of his countenance, and suffering even such as fear him to walk in darkness and to have no light; yet are they never utterly destitute of that seed of God, and life of faith, that love of Christ and the brethren, that sincerity of heart, and conscience of duty, out of which, by the operation of the Spirit, this assurance may, in due time, be revived; and by the which, in the meantime, they are supported from utter despair.

Commentary:

Ward says: "The presence of sin is the chief factor which takes away the believer's assurance, but there can be the discouragement which follows a testing experience or spiritual and physical exhaustion (cf. Elijah) as well as an unexplained withdrawal of God's comfortable presence."

Guthrie says:

"1. It is a mistake to think that every one who is in Christ knows that he is in him; for many are truly gracious, and have a good title to eternal life, who do not know so much, until it is made out afterwards: "These things are written to them that believe, that they may know they have a title to eternal life" (1 John 5:13); that is, that they may know they are believers, and so it is supposed they knew it not before.

"2. It is a mistake to think that all who come to the knowledge of their interest in Christ attain an equal certainty about it. One may say, "He is persuaded nothing present or to come can separate him from the love of God" (Rom 8:38); another comes only this far, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief." (Mark 9:24)

"3. It is a mistake to think that every one who attains a strong persuasion of his interest always holds there; for he who today may say of the Lord, "He is his refuge" (Ps 91:2) and "his portion" (Ps 119:57), will at another time say, "He is cut off" (Ps 31:22), and will ask, "If the truth of God's promise fails for evermore?" (Ps 77:7-9)

"4. It is also a mistake to think that every one who attains a good knowledge of his gracious state can formally answer all objections to the contrary; but yet they may hold fast the conclusion and say, "I know whom I have believed." (2 Tim 1:12) There are few grounds of the Christian religion of which many people are so persuaded that they are able to maintain them formally against all arguments brought to the contrary; and yet they may and will hold the conclusion steadfastly and justly; so it is in the case in hand."

Hodge says: "Since this assurance rests upon the consciousness of gracious experiences and the witness of the Holy Ghost; and as we have seen, under chapters xiii. and xvii., that true Christians may temporarily, though never totally, fall from the exercise of grace; and since these exercises in this life are never perfect and unmixed with carnal elements -- it necessarily follows that the assurance which rests upon them must be subject to be shaken, diminished, and intermitted in divers ways. (1.) Since it is a duty as well as a grace, it must be imperiled by any want of diligence in preserving it in full exercise. (2.) Since it rests upon the consciousness of gracious exercises, it must be marred, if not intermitted, by any notable fall into sin which grieves the Holy Spirit and wounds the conscience, thus clouding the sense of forgiveness and diminishing the evidence of grace. (3.) The same may evidently be effected by some vehement temptation. (4.) The same effect may be produced by God's withdrawing the light of his countenance, in the way of fatherly discipline, for the purpose of trying our faith, of convincing us of our entire dependence, and of the all-sufficiency of his gracious help.

"4. Since the true believer may fall into sin, but may never fall totally from grace, it is self-evident, as taught in these sections, that he may lose the exercise of full assurance, but that he cannot lose the principle from which it springs; and that hence, through the blessing of God upon the diligent use of the appropriate means, it may be strengthened when weakened and recovered when lost."
(19.1 The Moral Law has been around since the Garden of Eden - not just since Sinai)

19.1 God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, by which he bound him and all his posterity to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience, promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it, and endued him with power and ability to keep it.

Commentary:
A major point of this section is that humanity has always been bound to obey revealed standards of righteousness. God revealed these standards to our first parents.

Ward says: "In WCF 4:2 we saw that our first parents 'had the law of God written in their hearts' and that 'in addition to this law written in their hearts they received a command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.' The relation of the moral law written on the heart at creation to the explicit command about the fruit is this: the former is the precondition for the latter. Our first parents' attitude to the express command concentrates, or brings into focus, their attitude to the former. So the explicit command, which is the point of testing in the covenant, really involves the entire moral law written on Adam's heart from the beginning, hence the statement here cf. WCF 7.2. Note also the essential identity of this moral law and the Ten Commandments given (see WCF 19:2)."

Shaw says: "God having formed man an intelligent creature, and a subject of moral government, he gave him a law for the rule of his conduct. This law was founded in the infinitely righteous nature of God, and the moral relations necessarily subsisting between him and man. It was originally written on the heart of man, as he was endowed with such a perfect knowledge of his Maker's will as was sufficient to inform him concerning the whole extent of his duty, in the circumstances in which he was placed, and was also furnished with power and ability to yield all that obedience which was required of him. This is included in the moral image of God, after which man was created.—Gen. i. 27. The law, as thus inscribed on the heart of the first man, is often styled the law of creation, because it was the will of the sovereign Creator, revealed to the reasonable creature, by impressing it upon his mind and heart at his creation. It is also called the moral law, because it was a revelation of the will of God, as his moral governor, and was the standard and rule of man's moral actions. Adam was originally placed under this law in its natural form, as merely directing and obliging him to perfect obedience. He was brought under it in a covenant form, when an express threatening of death, and a gracious promise of life, was annexed to it; and then a positive precept was added, enjoining him not to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, as the test of his obedience to the whole law.—Gen. ii. 16, 17. That this covenant was made with the first man, not as a single person, but as the federal representative of all his natural posterity, has been formerly shown. The law, as invested with a covenant form, is called, by the Apostle Paul, "The law of works" (Rom. iii. 27); that is, the law as a covenant of works. In this form, the law is to be viewed as not only prescribing duty, but as promising life as the reward of obedience, and denouncing death as the punishment of transgression. This law "which was ordained to life," is now become "weak through the flesh," or through the corruption of our fallen nature. It prescribes terms which we are incapable of performing; and instead of being encouraged to seek life by our own obedience to the law as a covenant, we are required to renounce all hopes of salvation in that way, and to seek it by faith in Christ. But all men are naturally under the law as a broken covenant, obnoxious to its penalty, and bound to yield obedience to its commands. The covenant being made with Adam, not only for himself, but also for all his posterity, when he violated it, he left them all under it as a broken covenant. Most miserable, therefore is the condition of all men by nature; for "as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse."—Gal. iii. 10. Truly infatuated are they who seek for righteousness by the works of the law; for "by the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified in the sight of God."—Rom. iii. 20."
Chapter 19 - Of the Law of God

(19.2 The Same Moral Law given in the Garden was given at Sinai)

19.2 This law, after his fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness; and, as such, was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments, and written in two tables: the four first commandments containing our duty towards God; and the other six, our duty to man.

Commentary:

Ward says: “The moral law was a rule of judgment by which disobedience was condemned, but it was also a rule of righteousness reflecting the divine requirement. It continues as such for God’s people under the covenant of grace (see also WCF 19:6 below). The Mosaic dispensation was a particular administration of the covenant of grace. Its requirements were to be fulfilled in the context of grateful response to the God of salvation who had redeemed them from bondage in Egypt. If we speak of the giving of the Ten Commandments as a republication of the law written on the heart in a form of words appropriate for its recipients - and it is correct to do so - we need to remember the context of redemptive grace in which the giving occurred.

Roman Catholics and Lutherans arrange the commandments by combining the first two and dividing the last one into two (coveting wife and coveting possessions), but the arrangement of the Hebrew Bible is followed by the Confession as also by the Greek Orthodox and by Protestants. (Traditional Jewish interpretation takes the preface as the first commandment requiring strict monotheism, and combines two and three.) One should not assume from popular representations that four commandments were written on one tablet and six on another. Almost certainly all were written on each tablet, so that two copies existed in line with ancient treaty practice. Further, a neat division between the first four and the last six cannot be made because of the unity of the law - if we offend in one point we are guilty of all. After all, the underlying principle is love to God and our neighbour, the latter flowing from the former (James 2:8-11).

The unique position of the moral law is seen in the fact that: (1) only the Ten Commandments were spoken by God’s voice; (2) they alone were accompanied by the shaking of Mount Sinai; (3) they alone were written by his finger; (4) they alone were written on enduring stone tablets rather than merely being written in a book (Deut 4:10-14; Ex 24:4) and (5) they alone of the various laws were placed in the ark of the covenant (Deut 10:5). (6) They formed the introduction to the Mosaic covenant which, in fact, expounds them in a manner appropriate for the people at that time (Deut 6-26). (7) Of course they were also fully complete, the tablets being written on the front and the back, so that there was no room for other commandments of the same unique kind for there were none (Ex 32:15), and (8) they were regarded as superior to the ceremonial law (eg. Ps 51:16-19; Jer 7; Amos 5). (9) It should also be remembered that the greatest commandment, on which depends everything else, is total love for the Lord (Matt 22:37 quoting the exposition of the first commandment in Deut 6) and also love for one’s neighbour - a command which, while explicit in a context of laws of different character, is a necessary corollary to the other given that humans bear the divine likeness (Lev 19:18 cf. Matt 7:12). Hence, (10) these considerations lead to the common view that the Decalogue is a reflection, in a form suited to the historical situation of Israel, of the moral law, the law of love, written on Adam’s heart at his creation.

Although the ten commandments can be distinguished, Christians do not obey them because commanded by Moses, but as they receive them from Christ in the Gospel. For we are not under the covenant given through Moses, but under the new covenant given through Christ. Thus one can readily admit that the law of Moses as a unit is superceded yet highlight the ten commandments as of abiding relevance. This is so, not because they are part of the law of Moses, but because in essence they date from creation, the Lord merely republishing them in a particular context through Moses.
Chapter 19 - Of the Law of God

(19.3 The Ceremonial Law of Sinai is abrogated under the New Covenant)

19.3 Beside this law, commonly called moral, God was pleased to give to the people of Israel, as a church under age, ceremonial laws, containing several typical ordinances, partly of worship, prefiguring Christ, his graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits; and partly, holding forth divers instructions of moral duties. All which ceremonial laws are now abrogated, under the New Testament.

Commentary:
Shaw says: “Besides the moral law, God gave to Israel ceremonial and judicial laws; the two latter are of limited and temporary use; the former is of universal and perpetual obligation.

1. The ceremonial law respected the Jews in their ecclesiastical capacity, or as a Church, and prescribed the rites and carnal ordinances which were to be observed by them in the external worship of God. These ceremonies were chiefly designed to prefigure Christ, and lead them to the knowledge of the way of salvation through him.—Reb. x. 1. This law is abrogated under the New Testament dispensation. This appears—1. From the nature of the law itself. It was given to the Jews to separate them from the idolatrous rites of other nations, and to preserve their religion uncorrupted. But when the gospel was preached to all nations, and Jews and Gentiles were gathered into one body, under Christ, their Head, the wall of separation was taken down.—Eph. ii. 14, 15. 2. Because these ceremonies were only figures of good things to come, imposed upon the Jews until the time of reformation, and were abrogated by Christ, in whom they were realised and substantiated—Heb. ix. 9-12. 3. Because these ceremonies were given to the Israelites to typify and represent Christ and his death; and, since Christ has come, and has, by his death and satisfaction, accomplished all that they prefigured, these types must be abolished.—Col. ii. 17. 4. Because many of these rites were restricted to the temple of Jerusalem, and the temple being now destroyed, these rites must cease along with it. 5. Because the apostles expressly taught, that the ceremonial law is abrogated under the Christian dispensation.—Acts xv. 24. One chief design of the Epistle to the Hebrews is, to prove that this law must necessarily be annulled.—Heb. vii. 12.

Ward says: “The ceremonial laws are agreed by all to have been abrogated by the ratification of the new covenant by Christ since the reality of grace shadowed by them has come, as also the fulfilment of truth (John 1:17). Yet there are exceptions to this agreement: classical dispensationalists (see page 102) speak of a restored temple and a revival of the ancient worship of Israel in an earthly millennium to begin at the return of Christ. This is contrary to all right understanding of the covenant of grace and the purpose of God in the choice of Israel.

“Others accept that Christ fulfilled the ceremonial law yet reintroduce symbolic worship into Christian worship - candles, incense, bowing to the east, sacred buildings, fancy dress, and so on. This seems to reflect a failure in practice to understand the newness that has come in Christ, or else an indifference to the sufficiency of Scripture so that human additions that are unauthorised by God, but considered useful by men, are introduced.

Hodge says: "That the ceremonial law introduced by Moses was typical of Christ and his work is taught throughout the New Testament, and especially in the Epistle to the Hebrews. It was declared to be a "shadow of things to come, but the body is of Christ." The tabernacle and its services were "patterns of things in the heavens," and figures, antitypes, of the true tabernacle, into which Christ has now entered for us. Col. ii. 17; Heb. ix. 23, 24. Christ is said to have effected our salvation by offering himself as a sacrifice and by acting as our high priest. Eph. v. 2; Heb. ix. 11, 12, 26, 28; xiii. 11, 12. That the coming of Christ has superseded and for ever done away with the ceremonial law is also evident from the very fact just stated -- that its ceremonies were types of him, that they were the shadows of which he was the substance. Their whole purpose and design were evidently discharged as soon as his real work of satisfaction was accomplished; and therefore it is not only a truth taught in Scripture (Heb. x. 1 -- 14; Col. ii. 14 -- 17; Eph. ii. 15, 16), but an undeniable historical fact, that the priestly work of Christ immediately and definitely superseded the work of the Levitical priest. The instant of Christ’s death, the veil separating the throne of God from the approach of men "was rent in twain from the top to the bottom" (Matt. xxvii. 50, 51), thus throwing the way open to all, and dispensing with priests and their ceremonial for ever.”
Chapter 19 - Of the Law of God

November 30

(19.4 The Judicial Law of Sinai is not binding under the New Covenant)

19.4 To them also, as a body politic, he gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people; not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require.

Commentary:

Ward says: "The civil or judicial laws were given to Israel in her special position as the theocratic nation and reflected the requirement that Israel be a holy people. One might also speak of these laws in their nature and penalties as prefiguring righteousness in Christ, and also the destruction of sin through Christ. At any rate, the civil law of Israel does not bind any other people now, since no earthly nation today is in the same theocratic position as ancient Israel."

"The New Testament church is the proper continuation of Israel - not a replacement of Israel, but an expansion of Israel which supercedes the theocracy to establish the 'holy nation' (1 Peter 2:9 cf. Ex 19:6) among all the nations. From this viewpoint church authorities must take seriously the Old Testament laws, particularly those that were marked by the death penalty or exclusion ('cutting off') from the nation. It would seem that professing believers who commit similar offences today are subject to the equivalent penalty - spiritual death, that is, excommunication if they do not repent (compare the position of the incestuous man at Corinth, 1 Cor 5:1ff and Lev 18:8,29)."

Civil authorities today, especially those living in the light of special revelation, can learn from the Old Testament judicial laws too. However, the civil ruler today will not apply Mosaic civil laws or penalties because they are prescribed by the Mosaic law, but because he discerns that the law or the penalty reflects a basic principle of justice and right that ought always to be applied in a manner appropriate to a particular society. An obvious example is the law of incest; another is the law of negligence. Some laws will have no civil application today because they were set with the special holiness of theocratic Israel in mind. As to penalties, the emphasis in the law of Moses on restitution rather than incarceration is noteworthy, as is the principle of equality before the law.

The verses cited by the Confession from Matthew 5 are interesting. Verse 17 reminds us Jesus did not come to destroy the law but to fulfill it, while verses 38-39 refer to turning the other cheek rather than applying the eye for an eye principle of the Mosaic law. In other words the citing of these texts appears to suggest that the 'fulfilment' of the law in this case was by its abrogation and the realisation of its ultimate purpose by the application of the law of forgiveness [cf. S.B. Ferguson in W.S. Barker & W.R. Godfrey (eds), Theonomy: A Reformed Critique (1990), 336]. One does not need to agree exactly with this interpretation of verses 38-39 to accept the principle behind it.

Paul sees the equity principle in an Old Testament passage forbidding muzzling working oxen, and uses it to exhort the adequate financial support of ministers (1 Cor 9:9-12; 1 Tim 5:18). Similarly, the use by the Assembly of particular texts in the civil law, particularly in the section on the commandments in the Larger Catechism, shows they distinguished the civil law in the Mosaic code from the principle of equity, fairness or justice behind it. Note their use (WCF 22.7) of Numbers 30 as proof that vows not according to the word of God are forbidden, when that passage is dealing with the right of a father to cancel the vows of his wife or daughters. They do not follow the law, but they recognize a principle of justice behind it.

The civil ruler will not necessarily find all the answers in the Mosaic legislation. For example, there is no penalty provided for a man having intercourse with a prostitute but the death penalty is prescribed for adultery. Does this mean that a Christian country today should not have laws against prostitution and that it should attach civil penalties to adultery? Opinions may vary among those united in opposing such behaviour as to how best to combat these evils. Such differences are found in discussions both before and after the Westminster Confession was adopted, and no doubt will continue.

It should be noted that the Noahic provisions of Genesis 9:6, which include the death penalty for murder, belong to the race as a whole and predate the existence of Israel. It is here and not in the Mosaic legislation that the foundation for capital punishment should be sought. Certainly the tendency to extend such a punishment to a multitude of lesser crimes should be resisted.
(19.5 The Moral Law is permanent and universal)

19.5 The moral law doth forever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof; and that, not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God the Creator, who gave it. Neither doth Christ, in the gospel, any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation.

**ANALYSIS WCF 19: 1-7**

1-2. The moral law
   a. its creation origin
   b. its Mosaic repetition

3. Israel's ceremonial law
   a. its purpose and fulfilment

4. Israel's judicial law
   a. has perished with the theocracy
   b. elements of general equity remain valid

5. The moral law's permanence and universality

6. The uses of the moral law
   a. for all persons
   b. for believers

7. The harmony of the moral law with grace

**Commentary:**

Ward says: The moral law is that which was originally written by the Creator on the human heart, hence the basis of our obligation to obey it is twofold: because God is its author and because of its content. Man as a creature is necessarily subject to his Creator's law, and finds true liberty in conformity to it. Jesus did not come to destroy the law but to fulfill it. The previous section employed Matthew 5:17 in conjunction with other verses to show that some things in the Mosaic law do change. In this section the same text is used to indicate that the moral law does not change, but is reinforced by the other changes that he brought. Christ does not change the basis of our obligation but he adds the additional reasons which arise from his redeeming love. Thus for example, his new commandment: to love one another as I have loved you (John 13:34).

Shaw says: "The moral law is so called because it relates to moral actions, and to distinguish it from the positive laws, which were only of temporary obligation. This law has no relation to times and places, or to one nation more than another; but being founded in the relations of men to their Creator, and to one another, it retains its authority under all dispensations. In opposition to the Antinomians, who say that believers are released from the obligation of the moral law, our Confession teaches that this law is perpetually binding on justified persons, as well as others. Believers are, indeed, delivered from this law in its covenant form; but they are still under it as a rule of life, in the hand of the Mediator, being "not without law to God, but under the law to Christ."—1 Cor. ix. 21. Christ, in the most solemn and explicit manner, declared, that he "came not to destroy the law, but to fulfill it."— Matt. v. 17. He fulfilled it, as a covenant, by his own perfect obedience, and his most grievous sufferings in the room of his people; and its heavenly precepts he has enforced upon their minds, by the most cogent motives, as a perfect rule of duty. The gospel, instead of weakening the obligation of the law, confirms and strengthens its authority, and enforces obedience to its precepts by the strongest motives: "Do we make void the law through faith? God forbid; nay, we establish the law."—Rom. iii. 31. Although the moral law is to believers divested of its covenant form, it remains immutably the same, in regard both to its matter and its authority. And as the law was binding on the first man as a rule of life, antecedent to any covenant-transaction between God and him, we may easily understand that the law may be entirely divested of its covenant form, while it continues in full force as a rule of moral conduct.
Chapter 19 - Of the Law of God

(19.6 The Law is of Great Benefit to Believers)

19.6 Although true believers be not under the law, as a covenant of works, to be thereby justified, or condemned; yet is it of great use to them, as well as to others; in that, as a rule of life informing them of the will of God, and their duty, it directs and binds them to walk accordingly; discovering also the sinful pollutions of their nature, hearts, and lives; so as, examining themselves thereby, they may come to further conviction of, humiliation for, and hatred against sin, together with a clearer sight of the need they have of Christ, and the perfection of his obedience. It is likewise of use to the regenerate, to restrain their corruptions, in that it forbids sin: and the threatenings of it serve to show what even their sins deserve; and what afflictions, in this life, they may expect for them, although freed from the curse thereof threatened in the law. The promises of it, in like manner, show them God's approbation of obedience, and what blessings they may expect upon the performance thereof: although not as due to them by the law as a covenant of works. So as, a man's doing good, and refraining from evil, because the law encourageth to the one, and deterreth from the other, is no evidence of his being under the law; and, not under grace.

Commentary:

Ward says: "The Reformed faith holds to the 3-fold use of the moral law: (1) as the standard for society; (2) as a rule of life leading to repentance; (3) as a rule of life for believers. Luther, with his central concern of a free justification, was less positive about the third use as he placed more emphasis on the spontaneity of the believer’s obedience, perhaps out of concern to avoid legalism or moralism. Some evangelicals have distinguished between Christ as Saviour and Christ as Lord to the extent of rejecting the law as a rule of life for believers, and the general understanding of this subject is exceedingly poor in most Christian circles."

Hodge says: "It is here affirmed, that true believers are completely delivered from the law, as a covenant of works. Christ, as their representative and surety, endured the curse of the law in all its bitterness, and in its utmost extent, in his sufferings unto death, and thus set them completely free from its condemning power.—Gal. iii. 13; Rom. viii. 1. But had Christ only endured the curse of the law, and still left his people under its commanding power as a covenant, this would only have restored them to the same uncertain state of probation in which Adam originally stood, and every transgression would have again involved them under the curse. Christ, however, not only sustained the full infliction of the penalty of the law, he also yielded perfect obedience to its precepts, and thus obtained for his people deliverance from its commanding, as well as its condemning power. To show the complete nature of this freedom, we are told that they are dead to the law through the body of Christ; that Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth; and that they are not under the law, but under grace.—Rom. vii. 4, x. 4, vi. 14.

"The doctrine of the believer’s freedom from the law, as a covenant, has no tendency to licentiousness; for it has already been established, that they are under the obligation of the law as a rule of life; and here it is further shown that the law is of manifold use to them, as well as to others: "The law is good," says the Apostle Paul, "if a man use it lawfully" (1 Tim. i. 8); that is, if he use it in a suitableness to the state wherein he is, either as a believer or an unbeliever. The law serves numerous and important purposes, both to the unregenerate and to the regenerate. Some of these uses may be briefly stated: -

First. To the unregenerate the moral law is of use in the following respects:—

1. To restrain them from much sin.—1 Tim. i. 9.
2. To convince them of their sinfulness and misery.—Rom. iii. 20, vii. 9.
3. To discover to them their absolute need of Christ, and drive them to him as their all-sufficient Saviour.—Gal. iii. 24.
4. To render them inexcusable, if they continue in their sins, and finally reject the only Saviour of lost sinners.—Rom. i. 20, ii. 15; John iii. 18, 36.

Second. The moral law is of use to the regenerate in the following respects: -

1. To render Christ more precious to them, and excite their gratitude to him who so loved them as to obey its precepts and suffer its penalty, that he might deliver them from it as a covenant.—Gal. iii. 13, iv. 4, 5.
2. To show them the will of God, and regulate their conduct.—Mic. vi. 8.
3. To serve as a standard of self-examination, in order to discover the pollutions of their hearts and lives—to keep them self-abased—to lead them to a constant dependence upon Christ, and to excite them to a progressive advancement in holiness.—Phil. iii. 10-14.
4. To serve as a test of their sincerity, that they may assure their hearts that they are of the truth, and that they delight in the law of God after the inward man, notwithstanding their manifold defects in duty.—1 John iii. 19; Rom. vii. 22, 25; 2 Cor. i. 12.
(19.7 These uses of the Law are not against the Gospel)

19.7 Neither are the forementioned uses of the law contrary to the grace of the gospel, but do sweetly comply with it; the Spirit of Christ subduing and enabling the will of man to do that freely, and cheerfully, which the will of God, revealed in the law, requireth to be done.

Commentary:
Ward says: "The purpose of Christ's redeeming work is to deliver us from sin and disobedience so that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us through the Spirit (Romans 8:4). Our obedience to the law is imperfect in this life but the believer sees the law as the expression of God's will to which, by God's grace, he now aspires and to which he will be brought to full conformity at the last by that same grace.

Hodge says: "In these sections it is affirmed: --
1. That since the fall no man is able to attain to righteousness and eternal life through obedience to the law. This is beyond question, because all men have sinned; because men's natures are depraved; because the law demands perfect and perpetual obedience; and because "if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain." Gal. ii. 21.

2. That those who have embraced the gospel of Christ are no longer under the law as a covenant of life, but under grace.

3. That nevertheless, under the gospel dispensation, and in perfect harmony with its principles, the law is of manifold uses for all classes of men, and especially in the following respects: --

(1.) To all men generally the law is a revelation of the character and will of God, a standard of moral excellence, and a rule for the regulation of action.

(2.) To unregenerate men, considered in relation to the gospel, the law is of use to convince them of the holiness and justice of God, of their own guilt and pollution, of their utter inability to fulfil its requirements, and so to act as a schoolmaster to bring them to Christ. Rom. vii. 7 -- 13 Gal iii. 24.

(3) With respect to incorrigible sinners, the law is of use to restrain the outbursts of their evil passions, to render their disobedience without excuse, to vindicate the justice of God in their condemnation, and to render their cases a warning to others. 1 Tim. i. 9; Rom. i. 20; ii. 15; John iii. 18, 3.

(4.) In respect to regenerate men, the law continues to be indispensable as the instrument of the Holy Ghost in the work of their sanctification. It remains to them an inflexible standard of righteousness, to which their nature and their actions ought to correspond. It shows them the extent of their obligations to Christ, and how far short, as yet, they are from having apprehended that whereunto they were apprehended in Christ Jesus. It thus tends to set up in the regenerate the habit of conviction of sin and of repentance and faith. Its threatenings and its promises present motives deterring from sin and assuring of grace, and thus leading the soul onward to that blissful attainment when the sovereignly imposed law of God will become the spontaneous law of our spirits, and hence that royal law of liberty of which James speaks. James i. 25; ii. 8, 12. See L. Cat., qs. 94 -- 97.
Chapter 20 - Of Christian Liberty and the Libert y of Conscience

(20.1 Christians have Gospel Freedom)

20.1 The liberty which Christ hath purchased for believers under the gospel consists in their freedom from the guilt of sin, the condemning wrath of God, the curse of the moral law; and, in their being delivered from this present evil world, bondage to Satan, and dominion of sin; from the evil of afflictions, the sting of death, the victory of the grave, and everlasting damnation; as also, in their free access to God, and their yielding obedience unto him, not out of slavish fear, but a childlike love and willing mind. All which were common also to believers under the law. But, under the New Testament, the liberty of Christians is further enlarged, in their freedom from the yoke of the ceremonial law, to which the Jewish church was subjected; and in greater boldness of access to the throne of grace, and in fuller communications of the free Spirit of God, than believers under the law did ordinarily partake of.

Rowland Ward's Translation

20.1 The liberty which Christ has purchased for believers under the gospel comprises freedom from the guilt of sin, the condemning wrath of God and the curse of the moral law. It includes deliverance from this present evil world, from bondage to Satan and from sin's domination, as well as from the evil of afflictions, the sting of death, the victory of the grave, and everlasting damnation. It also includes free access to God, and the giving of obedience to him out of childlike love and readiness rather than out of slavish fear. All of these blessings were also enjoyed by believers during Old Testament times, but in the New Testament dispensation the liberty of Christians is extended since they are freed from the yoke of the ceremonial law to which the Jewish Church was subjected, they have greater boldness of access to the throne of grace, and through the Spirit of God who brings freedom they have fuller gifts than believers normally enjoyed previously.

ANALYSIS WCF 20: 1-4

1. Christian liberty defined
   a. under the gospel (New Testament)
      - freedom from guilt, condemnation & curse
      - free access to God and child-like obedience
   b. under the law (Old Testament)
      - identity with gospel freedom
      - yet a relative restriction

2. Liberty of conscience defined
   a. to whom obliged
      - God alone - the Lord of the conscience
   b. to what beliefs/practices not obliged by conscience
      - anything contrary to Scripture
      - anything additional to Scripture in matters of faith/worship
   c. responsibilities
      - to ensure Scripture informs the conscience
      - to reject coercion of the conscience

3-4. The perversion of Christian liberty
   a. in private life: liberty is not licentiousness
   b. in public life: liberty is not individualism

This section explains or defines Christian liberty or freedom, shows that all believers in all ages have tasted of it, but that new covenant believers enjoy it in fuller measure. It also gives a wise pastoral warning against the abuse of Christian liberty or freedom.
Chapter 20 - Of Christian Liberty and the Liberty of Conscience

December 5

(20.2 God’s Authority is the only basis for true Christian freedom)

20.2 God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to his Word; or beside it, if matters of faith, or worship. So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.

Commentary:

Christians are free of any teaching or command that contradicts God’s word, or adds to it in the areas of theology and worship. As Robert Shaw says: “In this section the doctrine of liberty of conscience is laid down in most explicit terms. The conscience, in all matters of faith and duty, is subject to the authority of God alone, and entirely free from all subjection to the traditions and commandments of men.”

“To believe any doctrine, or obey any commandment, contrary to, or beside, the Word of God, out of submission to human authority, is to betray true liberty of conscience. And be the power and authority whose it will—be it that of a magistrate or a minister—of a husband, a master, or a parent—that would require an implicit faith and an absolute blind obedience, it would destroy liberty of conscience.

“The rights of conscience have been frequently invaded by rulers, both civil and ecclesiastical. By the Church of Rome the statements of our Confession are directly contradicted, both in doctrine and in practice. They teach that the Pope, and the bishops in their own dioceses, may, by their own authority, enact laws which bind the conscience, and which cannot be transgressed without incurring the same penalties which are annexed to every breach of the divine law. And they have actually imposed many articles of faith, and enjoined numberless rites and ceremonies, as necessary in the worship of God, which have no foundation in Scripture; and they require implicit faith in all their decrees, and a blind obedience to all their commands. Against the tyrannical usurpations and encroachments of that Church this section is principally levelled.

“No person on earth can have authority to dictate to conscience; for this would be to assume a prerogative which belongs to none but the supreme Lord and Legislator. "There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy."—James iv. 12. Such a power was prohibited by Jesus Christ among his followers: "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, but ye shall not be so."—Luke xxii. 25. It was disclaimed by the inspired apostles: "Not that we have dominion over your faith," said the Apostle of the Gentiles, "but are helpers of your joy."—2 Cor. i. 24.

“From the principles laid down in this section, it manifestly follows, that a right of private judgment about matters of religion belongs to every man, and ought to be exercised by every Christian. Christians are expressly required to examine and prove every doctrine by the unerring rule of the Word of God.—Isa viii. 20; 1 John iv. 1. They ought to be ready to render a reason of the hope which is in them (1 Pet. iii. 15); and this none can do who receive the doctrines and commandments of men with implicit faith and blind obedience. Whateover is not done in faith, nor accompanied with a personal persuasion of the obligation or lawfulness of it in the sight of God, is pronounced to be sin. - Rom. xiv. 23.”

Ward says: “God speaking in his word is the only rule for the human conscience. God’s truth is to be acknowledged and tyranny has no place, whether the absolutism of the Stuarts or the tyranny of 51%. The individual conscience cannot be surrendered to the church, or to any man or organisation. Here is the charter of true freedom.”
Chapter 20 - Of Christian Liberty and the Liberty of Conscience

(20.3 Christian Freedom is not a license to sin but the basis of change and growth in grace)

20.3 They who, upon pretense of Christian liberty, do practice any sin, or cherish any lust, do thereby destroy the end of Christian liberty, which is, that being delivered out of the hands of our enemies, we might serve the Lord without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life.

Ward says: “Freedom is not licence; spiritual freedom is not a throwing off of all constraint. History is littered with examples of those who have made this mistake. Nor does spiritual freedom mean that I must stop doing whatever someone, somewhere, particularly a fellow Christian, believes to be wrong. I must not use my liberty as a cover for evil doings, but if all other things are permissible not all are beneficial and not all are constructive (1 Cor 10:23). Again, ‘one man’s faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does’ (Rom 14:2-3). ‘God alone is Lord of the conscience...’

Packer says: "The New Testament sees salvation in Christ as liberation and the Christian life as one of liberty—Christ has freed us for freedom (Gal. 5:1; John 8:32, 36). Christ’s liberating action is not a matter of socio-politico-economic improvement, as is sometimes suggested today, but relates to the following three points:

First, Christians have been set free from the law as a system of salvation. Being justified by faith in Christ, they are no longer under God’s law, but under his grace (Rom. 3:19; 6:14-15; Gal. 3:23-25). This means that their standing with God (the “peace” and “access” of Rom. 5:1-2) rests wholly on the fact that they have been accepted and adopted in Christ. It does not, nor ever will it, depend on what they do; it will never be imperiled by what they fail to do. They live, and as long as they are in this world will live, not by being perfect, but by being forgiven.

All natural religion, then, is negated, for the natural instinct of fallen man, as expressed in every form of religion that the world has ever devised, is to suppose that one gains and keeps a right relationship with ultimate reality (whether conceived as a personal God or in other terms) by disciplines of law observance, right ritual, and asceticism. This is how the world’s faiths prescribe the establishing of one’s own righteousness—the very thing Paul saw unbelieving Jews trying to do (Rom. 10:3). Paul’s experience had taught him that this is a hopeless enterprise. No human performance is ever good enough, for there are always wrong desires in the heart, along with a lack of right ones, regardless of how correct one’s outward motions are (Rom. 7:7-11; cf. Phil. 3:6), and it is at the heart that God looks first.

All the law can do is arouse, expose, and condemn the sin that permeates our moral makeup, and so make us aware of its reality, depth, and guilt (Rom. 3:19; 1 Cor. 15:56; Gal. 3:10). So the futility of treating the law as a covenant of works, and seeking righteousness by it, becomes plain (Gal. 3:10-12; 4:21-31), as does the misery of not knowing what else to do. This is the bondage to the law from which Christ sets us free.

Second, Christians have been set free from sin’s domination (John 8:34-36; Rom. 6:14-23). They have been supernaturally regenerated and made alive to God through union with Christ in his death and risen life (Rom. 6:3-11), and this means that the deepest desire of their heart now is to serve God by practicing righteousness (Rom. 6:18, 22). Sin’s domination involved not only constant acts of disobedience, but also a constant lack of zeal for law-keeping, rising sometimes to positive resentment and hatred toward the law. Now, however, being changed in heart, motivated by gratitude for acceptance through free grace, and energized by the Holy Spirit, they “serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code” (Rom. 7:6). This means that their attempts at obedience are now joyful and integrated in a way that was never true before. Sin rules them no longer. In this respect, too, they have been liberated from bondage.

Third, Christians have been set free from the superstition that treats matter and physical pleasure as intrinsically evil. Against this idea, Paul insists that Christians are free to enjoy as God’s good gifts all created things and the pleasures that they yield (1 Tim. 4:1-5), provided only that we do not transgress the moral law in our enjoyments or hinder our own spiritual well-being or that of others (1 Cor. 6:12-13; 8:7-13). The Reformers renewed this emphasis against various forms of medieval legalism."
Chapter 20 - Of Christian Liberty and the Liberty of Conscience

December 7

(20.4 Gospel Freedom does not mean absolute freedom from all human authority)

20.4 And because the powers which God hath ordained, and the liberty which Christ hath purchased, are not intended by God to destroy, but mutually to uphold and preserve one another, they who, upon pretense of Christian liberty, shall oppose any lawful power, or the lawful exercise of it, whether it be civil or ecclesiastical, resist the ordinance of God. And, for their publishing of such opinions, or maintaining of such practices, as are contrary to the light of nature, or to the known principles of Christianity (whether concerning faith, worship, or conversation), or to the power of godliness; or, such erroneous opinions or practices, as either in their own nature, or in the manner of publishing or maintaining them, are destructive to the external peace and order which Christ hath established in the church, they may lawfully be called to account, and proceeded against, by the censures of the church.

Commentary

Ward says: “True liberty is the liberty to do what is right. As a citizen of the state and as a church member, the Christian has responsibilities. If he misuses his liberty he is subject to appropriate action from one or both of these institutions. The American editions of the Confession usually exclude the right of the civil authorities to censure religious opinions and practices resulting from them, an amendment dating from qualifications made by the Synod of Philadelphia in September 1729. However, it should be noted that the Confession does not regard the mere holding of an heretical opinion as censurable, although under the English Court of High Commission such was the case up to 1640. It is the public propagation of deviations from fundamental matters of the faith, as well as divisive and disorderly behaviour arising from the advocacy of such errors, which a state living under the light of revelation is obliged to deal with in a way appropriate in the circumstances if it would be, as it should be, a Christian nation. Of course, erroneous opinions may often be ignored, and left to be combated by the spiritual means the church possesses, but there may be situations where the free expression of views must be restricted - particularly when gross ignorance prevails, crimes are committed, or actions subversive of good order occur. WCF 23:3 envisages that heresy is dealt with by the church. The civil power is merely to encourage the church to do its duty.

‘It is important to note that liberty as a citizen is not founded upon an abstract ground, such as is commonly advocated by modern liberal democratic states. This kind of liberty is based in the will of man rather than the word of God and leads to all manner of evils being propagated under the guise of ‘freedom of religious expression,’ or as a result of the tyranny of 51%. The previous chapter of the Confession has reminded us that all owe allegiance to the moral law, and that responsibility is not diminished when a person exercises civil office. Of course the church and the state are not to be subjected to each other, but they ought to co-operate in a manner which recognises the autonomy of each, because they aim at the same end, the glory of God and the good of man, although using different means. What God’s word says is the proper basis for a free society. It will be found to secure true liberty where applied by leaders of wisdom and integrity.

‘The declaration noted above by the Free Church of Scotland is to be taken as a rejection of the interpretation of this section of the Confession that alleges that the involvement of the state in matters concerning religion is ipso facto contrary to liberty of conscience and the right of private judgment, and necessarily of a persecuting, coercive character. This was the interpretation argued by the extreme ‘Voluntaries’ in Scotland in the 19th century who were among the forerunners of the secular/atheistic state ideal, which has afflicted much modern life. But it is one thing to separate church and state; it is another to say that the state has nothing to do with religion, or that freedom of religion means that the national recognition of the Christian faith is improper in predominantly Christian states. A Christian state will not coerce the conscience, nor persecute minority religions within its borders. It will in fact protect them and even take in the refugee and the dispossessed of other cultures, but not at the price of abandoning its Christian foundations or adopting neutrality in religion.

‘No serious thinker accepts that the state has no concern with morality, and no state can long endure without fundamental moral and spiritual values that direct and inform its life. All states restrict certain forms of product advertising, engage in media campaigns to influence opinion on many subjects, conduct psychological counselling programmes that reflect particular theories of human nature, and mandate educational programmes based on presuppositions which may or may not be Christian. The claim of a state to be strictly secular is a religious claim in itself, and the fruits of this religion, particularly in the communist states of the 20th century, show its tyrannical character. That there are difficulties in a Christian state dealing with various evils in a multicultural society is undoubted. Modern liberal democracies also have difficulty giving satisfaction in non-homogeneous communities.
Chapter 21 - Of Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day

(21.1 The Responsibility and Manner of Public Worship)

21.1 The light of nature showeth that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all, is good, and doth good unto all, and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might. But the acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture.

ANALYSIS

1. The duty of worship
   a. the light of general revelation
   b. the light of special revelation

2. The nature of worship
   a. its object is God
   b. its medium is Christ

3-4. Prayer as a part of worship
   a. what is required
   b. how it is to be offered
   c. its scope and content

5. Other parts of worship

6. The places of worship

Commentary

Ward says: "The light of nature teaches the duty of worship, but a sinner cannot obtain knowledge of mercy and redemption from this source. Special revelation is needed and accordingly the word of God directs us how to worship God. Taking up the point made in WCF 20:2, the requirement of divine institution is affirmed. It is God's prerogative to lay down how he is to be worshipped."

Shaw says: "Religious worship consists in that homage and honour which we give to God, as a being of infinite perfection; whereby we profess our subjection to, and confidence in him, as our chief good and only happiness. It may be viewed as either internal or external; the former consisting in that inward homage which we owe to God, such as loving, believing, fearing, trusting in him, and other elicit acts of the mind; the latter consisting in the outward expression of that homage, by the observance of his instituted ordinances. Concerning the external worship of God, our Confession affirms, in the first place, that God can be worshipped acceptably only in the way of his own appointment. As God is the sole object of religious worship, so it is his prerogative to prescribe the mode of it. Divine institution must, therefore, be our rule of worship; and whatever may be imagined to be useful and decent, must be examined and determined by this rule. It is not left to human prudence to make any alterations in, or additions to, God's own appointments. "What thing soever I command you," saith the Lord, "observe to do it; thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it."

Shaw writes: "The worship of God in or by images is one of the worst corruptions of the Church of Rome. God is a spiritual, invisible, and incomprehensible being, and cannot, therefore, be represented by any corporeal likeness or figure. In the second place, our Confession particularly condemns the worshiping of God "under any visible representation." The worshiping of God in or by images is an avowed practice of the Church of Rome. God is a spiritual, invisible, and incomprehensible being, and cannot, therefore, be represented by any corporeal likeness or figure. In the third place, our Confession not only condemns the worshiping of God by images, but also the worshiping him "in any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture." Not only has the Church of Rome corrupted the worship of God by a multitude of insignificant ceremonies, but even some Protestant Churches retain many of the usages of Popery, and enjoin the wearing of particular vestments by the ministers of religion, the observance of numerous festival days, the erection of altars in churches, the sign of the cross in baptism, bowing at the name of Jesus, and kneeling at the Lord's Supper. These practices we justly reckon superstitious, because there is no scriptural warrant for them, and they are the inventions of men. It would be well if those who enjoin and those who observe them would consider the words of God concerning the Jews: "In vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men." - Matt. xv. 9.
Chapter 21 - Of Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day

December 9

21.2 Religious worship is to be given to God, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; and to him alone; not to angels, saints, or any other creature: and, since the fall, not without a Mediator; nor in the mediation of any other but of Christ alone.

Commentary

Ward says: "Only the true God is to be worshipped. Veneration of ‘saints’ was approved by the Nicene Council in AD 787. This Council distinguished between latria, the worship due to God alone; hyperdulia, the inferior worship due to the Virgin Mary; and dulia, the lower worship due to the saints and martyrs. This lacks authority in the word of God. Worship of the saints involves belief that they are not just holy examples for our faith but actual agents, with a religious role of interceding powerfully for us and aiding us through their merits, and so is not merely a weakness of the simple but is highly offensive to the character of Christ as the only mediator."

Hodge says: "Religious worship is upon no pretence to be offered to angels, nor to saints, nor to any other creature, nor to God through any other mediator save Christ alone. The most authoritative Standards of the Church of Rome teach -- (1) That the Virgin Mary and saints and angels are to receive true religious worship, in proportion to their respective ranks. (2) That they are to be invoked to help us in our times of need. (3) That they are to be invoked to intercede with God or with Christ for us. (4) Some of their most authoritative books of worship teach that God is to be asked to save and help us on the ground of the merits of the saints; (5) That the pictures, images, and relics of saints and martyrs, are to be retained in churches and worshipped.

To avoid the charge of idolatry made upon them for these practices, they distinguish between (a.) Latria, or the highest religious worship, which is due to God alone, and (b.) Doula, or that inferior religious worship which is due in various degrees to saints and angels, according to their rank. Since also mark a middle degree of worship, which is due to the Virgin Mary alone, by the term Hyperdulia. They also distinguish between (a.) that direct worship which is due severally to God, to the Virgin, or to the saints and angels, and (b.) that indirect worship which terminates upon the person or image which represents to the worshipper the direct object of his worship.

The objections to this entire system are -- (1.) That it has neither as a whole nor in any element of it a shadow of support in Scripture. (2.) That the reasons for worshipping God apply to the worship of no other being. That reason and revelation unite in teaching us that a Being of infinite and absolute perfection, our Creator, Preserver, and moral Governor, stands apart from all other objects, and therefore is not to be classed as an object of worship with any other. (3.) The sin of worshipping other gods and angels is explicitly forbidden. Ex. xx. 3, 5; Col. ii. 18. When the people of Lystra proposed to worship Saint Paul and Saint Barnabas, "they rent their clothes, and ran in among the people," saying, "We also are men.....and preach unto you that ye should turn from these vanities unto the living God." Acts xiv. 14, 15. (4.) The worship of images, or of God, Christ, or saints by images, is forbidden in the Second Commandment. Ex. xx. 4, 5. (5.) The distinctions they make between the different degrees of worship due to God and to holy creatures, and between the indirect worship which terminates upon the image or picture and the direct worship which terminates upon the person represented by it, are not their peculiar property, but, as every missionary to the heathen knows, are common to them with the educated class among all idolaters. If the Romans be not idolaters, the sins forbidden in the First and Second Commandments have never been committed. (6.) The invocation of the saints is a pure absurdity, for unless they are omnipresent and omniscient, they cannot hear us; and in many cases, unless they are omnipotent, they cannot help us. The Romish explanation, that God may perhaps tell the saints what we pray, in order that the saints may in turn tell God, is worthy of the doctrine it explains. (7.) The saints and angels are not mediators between us and God or us and Christ -- (a.) Because it is explicitly asserted that Christ is the only Mediator between God and man. 1 Tim. ii. 5. (b) Christ has exhaustively discharged every requisite mediatorial function, both on earth and in heaven. Heb. ix. 12, 24; vii. 25; x. 14. (c.) Because we are "complete" in Christ, and we are exhorted to come immediately to God through Christ, and to come with the utmost boldness and sense of liberty. Col. ii. 10; Eph. ii. 18; iii. 12; Heb. iv. 15, 16; x. 19 -- 22. The very suggestion of supplementing the work of Jesus Christ with that of other mediators is infinitely derogatory to him. (d.) There can be no room for intercessors between us and Christ, because Christ is our tender Brother (Matt. xi. 28), and because it is the once of the Holy Ghost to draw men to Christ. John vi. 44; xvi. 18, 14. (e.) Even if there were need for other mediators, the saints would not be fit for the place. They are absent; they cannot hear when we cry. They are dependent; they cannot help others. As we have seen, they have no supererogatory merits, and therefore cannot lay in our behalf a foundation for our acceptance with God. They are busy worshipping and enjoying Christ in person, and have neither the time, the opportunity, nor the ability to manage the affairs of the world."
Chapter 21 - Of Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day

(21.3 Why and How we ought to pray)

21.3 Prayer, with thanksgiving, being one special part of religious worship, is by God required of all men: and, that it may be accepted, it is to be made in the name of the Son, by the help of his Spirit, according to his will, with understanding, reverence, humility, fervency, faith, love, and perseverance; and, if vocal, in a known tongue.

Commentary

Packer says: "God made us and has redeemed us for fellowship with himself, and that is what prayer is. God speaks to us in and through the contents of the Bible, which the Holy Spirit opens up and applies to us and enables us to understand. We then speak to God about himself, and ourselves, and people in his world, shaping what we say as response to what he has said. This unique form of two-way conversation continues as long as life lasts.

"The Bible teaches and exemplifies prayer as a fourfold activity, to be performed by God's people individually both in private (Matt. 6:5-8) and in company with each other (Acts 1:14; 4:24). Adoration and praise are to be expressed; contrite confession of sin is to be made and forgiveness sought; thanks for benefits received are to be offered; and petitions and supplications for ourselves and others are to be voiced. The Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4) embodies adoration, petition, and confession; the Psalter consists of models of all four elements of prayer.

"Petition, in which the persons praying humbly acknowledge their need and express themselves as trustfully depending on God to meet it out of his sovereign resources of wisdom and goodness, is the dimension of prayer that is most constantly highlighted in the Bible (e.g., Gen. 18:16-33; Exod. 32:31–33:17; Ezra 9:5-15; Neh. 1:5-11; 4:4-5, 9; 6:9, 14; Dan. 9:4-19; John 17; James 5:16-18; Matt. 7:7-11; John 16:23-24; Eph. 6:18-20; 1 John 5:14-16). Petition, along with the other modes of prayer, should ordinarily be directed to the Father, as the Lord's Prayer shows, but Christ may be called on for salvation and healing, as in the days of his flesh (Rom. 10:8-13; 2 Cor. 12:7-9), and the Holy Spirit for grace and peace (Rev. 1:4). It cannot be wrong to present petitions to God as triune or to request any spiritual blessing from any one of the three Persons, but there is wisdom in following the New Testament pattern.

"Jesus teaches that petition to the Father is to be made in his name (John 14:13-14; 15:15; 16:23-24). This means invoking his mediation, as the one who secures our access to the Father, and looking to him for support, as our intercessor in the Father's presence. We can only, however, look to him for support when we ask accords with God's revealed will (1 John 5:14) and our own motives in asking are right (James 4:3).

"Jesus teaches that we may properly press God hard with fervent persistence when we bring needs to him (Luke 11:5-13; 18:1-8), and that he will answer such prayer in positive terms. But we must remember that God, who knows what is best in a way that we do not, may deny our specific requests as to how the needs should be met. If he does, however, it is because he has something better to give than what we asked for, as was the case when Christ denied Paul healing for the thorn in his flesh (2 Cor. 12:7-9). To say "Your will be done," surrendering one's own expressed preference to the Father's wisdom as Jesus did in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:39-44), is the most explicit way of expressing faith in the goodness of what God has planned.

"There is no tension or inconsistency between the teaching of Scripture on God's sovereign foreordination of all things and on the efficacy of prayer. God foreordains the means as well as the end, and our prayer is foreordained as the means whereby he brings his sovereign will to pass.

"Christians who pray to God sincerely, with reverence and humility, with a sense of privilege and a pure (i.e., purified, penitent) heart, will find in themselves a Spirit-given filial instinct prompting prayer to and trust in their heavenly Father (Gal. 4:6; Rom. 8:15), and a desire to pray that outruns their uncertainty as to what thoughts they should express (Rom. 8:26-27). The mysterious reality of the Holy Spirit's help in prayer becomes known only to those who actually pray.
Chapter 21 - Of Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day

(21.4 For whom we ought and ought not to pray)

21.4 Prayer is to be made for things lawful; and for all sorts of men living, or that shall live hereafter: but not for the dead, nor for those of whom it may be known that they have sinned the sin unto death.

Commentary

Ward says: “Given the duty and privilege of prayer, we are warranted to pray concerning everyday needs as well as spiritual needs (Matt 6:32-33). Our prayers should embrace a wide range, including future generations, and specific individuals. However, the dead cannot be helped by our prayers, nor help us, and so it is wrong to pray for them or to them. But what is the sin that leads to death? John is explicit in his advice not to pray for the person who has committed this sin. The sin that leads to death appears to be apostasy from the faith once professed so that there is wilful rejection of Jesus Christ. It occurs in a context of a loving Christian community characterised by truly Christian concern for one another and evidences of the powerful operation of the grace of God. So it is a deliberate spurning of the grace of God by one who knows what he is doing. We may feel we cannot be certain that a person has committed the sin that leads to death, but our reluctance may be an index of our relaxed attitude to sin compared to the New Testament standard (cf. Luke 12:10; Heb 6:4-6; 10:26-31).

“...In our day there are some wrong approaches to prayer. Some of these are associated with ‘prosperity’ teaching, or with belief in territorial spirits and/or with the notion that the more time we spend in prayer the more we are likely to receive an answer. But also there is a general tendency to have a wish list approach to prayer, in which our needs are to the forefront. We need to remember the pattern of the prayer Jesus taught us, and have God and his glory first in our thinking - ‘not my will but yours be done’.”

Hodge says: “As to the subjects of intercession, we are taught to pray for all men living or to live. 1 Tim. ii. 1, 2; John xvii. 20. But not for those already dead, nor for those known to have committed the unpardonable sin.

“The doctrine of the Roman Church concerning prayers for the dead is a dependent part of their doctrine concerning the state of the souls of men after death. They hold that those who are perfect at the time of death go immediately to heaven; those who are infidels or die in mortal sin go immediately to hell; but the great mass of imperfect Christians go to purgatory, where they must stay until they get fit for heaven. Concerning purgatory, the Council of Trent teaches -- (1.) That there is a purifying fire through which imperfect Christian souls must pass. (2.) That the souls temporarily suffering therein may be materially benefited by the prayers of their fellow-Christians and the masses offered up in their behalf on earth. (Council of Trent, sess. 25.)

“But if there is no purgatory, as will be shown under chapter xxxii., there can be no prayers for the dead, since those in heaven need no intercession, and for those in hell none can avail. It is as presumptuous as it is futile to assail the throne of God with supplications ‘when once the Master of the house has shut to the door.’ Luke xiii. 25. The Scriptures teach of only two states of existence beyond death, and of a great, impassable gulf fixed between. Luke xvi. 25, 26. Besides, the practice of praying for the dead has no warrant, direct or by remote implication, in Scripture. SECTION V: The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear,[17] the sound preaching [18] and conscientious hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence,[19] singing of psalms with grace in the heart,[20] as also, the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ, are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God:[21] beside religious oaths,[22] vows,[23] solemn fastings,[24] and thanksgivings upon special occasions,[25] which are, in their several times and seasons, to be used in an holy and religious manner.[26]”
Chapter 21 - Of Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day

(21.5 The Biblical Elements of Worship, in addition to prayer)

21.5 The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear, the sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence, singing of psalms with grace in the heart; as also, the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ, are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God: beside religious oaths, vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings upon special occasions, which are, in their several times and seasons, to be used in an holy and religious manner.

Commentary

Shaw says: "Our Confession having explained the duty of prayer, proceeds to enumerate the other ordinances of religious worship; some of which are ordinary and elated, others extraordinary and occasional.

"1. The reading of the Scriptures. The reading of the Word of God ought to be attended to in public (Neh. vii. 8; Luke iv. 16); in families (Deut. vi. 6-9; Ps. lxviii. 5); and in secret. - John v. 39. "The Holy Scriptures are to be read with a high and reverent esteem of them; with a firm persuasion that they are the very Word of God, and that he only can enable us to understand them; with desire to know, believe, and obey the will of God revealed in them; with diligence and attention to the matter and scope of them; with meditation, application, self-denial, and prayer."

"2. The preaching and hearing of the Word. The preaching of the Word is a divine ordinance, and appointed to continue in the Church to the end of the world.—1 Cor. i. 21; Matt. xxviii. 20. That the office of the ministry is of divine institution, and a distinct office in the Church, appears from the following considerations:—1. Peculiar titles are in Scripture given to the ministers of the gospel. They are called pastors, teachers, stewards of the mysteries of God, bishops or overseers of the flock, and angels of the Churches. 2. Peculiar duties are assigned to them. They are to preach the Word, to rebuke and to instruct gainsayers (2 Tim. iv. 2, ii. 25); to administer the sacraments (Matt. xxviii. 19; 1 Cor. xi. 23), to watch over the flock, as those that must give an account (Heb. xiii. 17); to give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine; to meditate upon these things, and give themselves wholly to them. - Tim. ii. 13,15. 3. Peculiar duties are required of the people in reference to their ministers. They are called to know and acknowledge them that labour among them, and are over them in the Lord (1 Thess. v. 12); to esteem them highly in love for their work's sake (1 Thess. v. 13); to obey them that have the rule over them, and submit themselves (Heb. xiii. 17); to provide for their maintenance (Gal. vi. 6); and to pray for them. - 2 Thess. iii. 1. These things clearly prove that the ministry is a distinct office in the Church.

"Though all may and ought to read the Word of God, yet it is to be preached "only by such as are sufficiently gifted, and also duly approved and called to that office." Christians should improve their gifts and opportunities in a private way for mutual admonition and edification; but none, whatever gifts they may possess, are warranted to preach the gospel unless they have the call of Christ for that purpose. The apostles received their call immediately from Christ himself, and they were empowered to commit that sacred trust to inferior teachers; these, again, were commanded to commit it to faithful men who should be able to teach others; and none have a right to preach the gospel, in ordinary cases, but those who are thus authorised by Christ through the medium of persons already vested with official power in the Church. In the primitive Church, those who preached the Word were solemnly set apart to their office by 'the laying on of the hands of the presbytery.' - 1 Tim. iv. 14. A regular call to preach the gospel is necessary, on account of the people; for all the success of a minister's labours depends on the blessing of Christ, and the people have no warrant to expect this blessing upon the labours of those who are not the servants of Christ.—Jer. xxiii. 32. This call is no less necessary for the comfort and encouragement of ministers themselves; for as the work of the ministry is a work of peculiar difficulty and danger, so none are warranted to expect divine support and protection in the discharge of that work, but those who act under a divine commission.—Rom. x. 14, 15; Acts xxvi. 16,17

"3. Singing of psalms. This was enjoined, under the Old Testament, as a part of the ordinary worship of God, and it is distinguished from ceremonial worship.—Ps. lix. 30, 31. It is not abrogated under the New Testament, but rather confirmed.—Eph. v. 19; Col. iii. 16. It is sanctioned by the example of Christ and his apostles.—Matt. xxvi. 30; Acts xvi. 25. The Psalms of David were especially intended by God for the use of the Church, in the exercise of public praise, under the former dispensation; and they are equally adapted to the use of the Church under the present dispensation. ..."

"4. The due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ. As subsequent chapters treat fully of these ordinances, we pass them at present.

"5. Religious oaths and vows. These will come under our consideration in the next chapter.

"6. Solemn fastings and thanksgivings. Stated festival-days, commonly called holy-days, have no warrant in the Word of God; but a day may be set apart, by competent authority, for fasting or thanksgiving, when extraordinary dispensations of Providence administer cause for them. When judgments are threatened or inflicted, or when some special blessing is to be sought and obtained, fasting is eminently seasonable. When some remarkable mercy or deliverance has been received, there is a special call to thanksgiving. ..."
Chapter 21 - Of Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day

(21.6 The Place of new covenant worship is everywhere, in spirit and truth)

21.6 Neither prayer, nor any other part of religious worship, is now, under the gospel, either tied unto, or made more acceptable by any place in which it is performed, or towards which it is directed: but God is to be worshiped everywhere, in spirit and truth; as, in private families daily, and in secret, each one by himself; so, more solemnly in the public assemblies, which are not carelessly or wilfully to be neglected, or forsaken, when God, by his Word or providence, calleth thereunto.

Commentary

Ward says: “There were holy places on earth in the Old Testament period, but this has passed with the inauguration of the new covenant: the locality of our worship is now heaven itself (Heb 10:19). If we appreciate as we ought the excellency of the priesthood of Christ, such things as ritualistic worship, sacred buildings, bowing to the east, will be seen as a regression which obscures if it does not deny the reality of the believer’s entry by faith into the celestial splendour of the eternal courts through the perfect accomplishment of his faithful High Priest.

“Worship belongs to each day in the family and in private. However, public worship is not to be neglected either. Worship is response to God in the context of his covenant. The original title to WCF 21, Of Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day, suggests indeed the great importance of public worship on the Lord’s Day. The Lord has promised to meet with his people as they gather as his covenant people, and the elders are warranted to require such a use of the Lord’s Day.”

Shaw says: “Under the gospel, all difference of places for religious worship is abolished. We are required to a worship the Father in spirit and in truth” (John iv 21); without respect of places; and “to pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands without wrath and doubting.” —1 Tim. ii. 8. This condemns the practice of consecrating churches, and ascribing holiness to them; and also the superstitious opinion, that religious services are more acceptable to God and beneficial to men in one place than another.

“Religious worship ought to be performed in private families daily. This is a duty which the light of nature very plainly teaches. And the heathens will rise up in judgment against the prayerless families of professed Christians; for besides their tutelar deities, who were supposed to preside over cities and nations, and who had public honours paid to them in that character, they had their household gods, whom every private family worshipped at home as their immediate guardians and benefactors. But the light of Scripture gives a more clear discovery of the obligation to this duty. It is recommended by the example of the saints recorded in Scripture; and good examples as really bind us to the duty as express precepts. We find Abraham rearing up altars wherever he came; and his attention to family religion was expressly commended by God.—Gen. xviii. 19. We have the examples of Joshua (xxiv. 15); of Job (i. 6); and of David. 2 Sam. vi. 20. But we have a still more engaging example of family worship on record in Scripture than any of these, even the example of our Saviour himself, who, though he had no house of his own, yet he had a family.—Matt. x. 25. Now we find him retiring from the crowd that followed him, and praying with his own family (Luke ix. 18): "As he was alone praying, his disciples were with him." The practice of family worship tends to promote even the temporal prosperity of families; for it is the blessing of God that maketh rich and prosperous; and what more likely way to obtain that blessing, than for a whole family to join in prayer and ask it daily of God? —Prov. iii. 33. Much more does family worship tend to promote the spiritual and eternal interests of families; while it is also the most effectual means to propagate religion from generation to generation. On the other hand, the neglect of this duty will bring the curse of God upon families; for "the curse of the Lord is in the house of the wicked." —Prov. iii. 33. How awful is that text (Jer. x. 25): "Pour out thy fury upon the heathen that know thee not, and upon the families that call not upon thy name." Let the head of every family, then, adopt the excellent resolution of Joshua: "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."
Chapter 21 - Of Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day

(21.7 The Privilege of the Lord’s Day or “Christian Sabbath”)

21.7 As it is the law of nature, that, in general, a due proportion of time be set apart for the worship of God; so, in his Word, by a positive, moral, and perpetual commandment binding all men in all ages, he hath particularly appointed one day in seven, for a sabbath, to be kept holy unto him: which, from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, was the last day of the week; and, from the resurrection of Christ, was changed into the first day of the week, which, in Scripture, is called the Lord’s day, and is to be continued to the end of the world, as the Christian sabbath.

21.7 (MESV) As it is the law of nature that, in general, a proper proportion of time ought to be set apart for the worship of God, so God in his Word—by a positive, moral, and perpetual commandment binding all men in all ages—has specifically appointed one day in seven for a Sabbath to be kept holy to him. From the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, the appointed Sabbath was the last day of the week. Beginning with the resurrection of Christ, the Sabbath was changed to the first day of the week, which in Scripture is called the Lord’s day, a day to be continued until the end of the age as the Christian Sabbath.

ANALYSIS WCF 21: 7-8

7-8. The special day of worship
   a. the creation sabbath
   b. the sabbath in the Decalogue
   c. the day changed but the sabbath preserved
   d. how to observe the sabbath

When we engage in public worship remains important for those of us who live in the new covenant era. In the days of the old covenant, worship was to be rendered on the seventh day because of God’s creational rest and on the various feast days as they foreshadowed new covenant realities. Now, in the end of the ages, corporate worship is to be done on the first day of the week, the Lord’s Day.

Even for those who do not embrace the Reformed view of the Christian Sabbath, four tremendous realities establish the importance of Lord’s Day corporate worship:

(1) the resurrection of Christ, which is foundational to the re-creative work of Christ in making a people for himself (Mark 16:1-8, cf. verse 9, 2 Corinthians 5:14-17, Galatians 6:15-16; Colossians 1:15-22,)

(2) the eternal rest foreshadowed in the Lord’s Day (Hebrews 4:9);


(4) the New Testament command to the saints to gather, Christ’s promise of presence with us when we do, the faithful example of the gathering of New Testament Christians and Jesus’ express command that we disciple new converts in the context of the local church (Hebrews 10:24-25, Matthew 18:20, Acts 1:4, Matthew 28:18-20).
21.8 This sabbath is then kept holy unto the Lord, when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering of their common affairs beforehand, do not only observe an holy rest, all the day, from their own works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments and recreations, but also are taken up, the whole time, in the public and private exercises of his worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy.

Commentary

Ward says: "The Old Testament has very little on the subject of sabbath observance. The essential emphasis is the cessation of ordinary employment and the use of the day for spiritual celebration. Psalm 92 - a psalm for the sabbath according to its title - indicates that praising the Lord, making music to him, singing for joy at the work of God's hands, trusting in his righteousness, and praising his constant love and power, are sabbath activities. The sabbath was not to be a day of doing nothing nor a day of mere external religious duties, but a day of heart-felt spiritual activity and of doing good.

"As for specific prohibitions, work during the ploughing and harvest times was prohibited on the sabbath (Exodus 34:21), presumably because people claimed that the limited period available to complete these tasks justified ignoring the sabbath. Jeremiah (17:21-27) and Nehemiah (13:15-22) prohibited the bearing of burdens on the sabbath, but the context indicates commercial activity was involved. There are two other prohibitions. Fire in dwellings is banned in Exodus 35:3, but occurs in the context of instructions about the building of the tabernacle, no doubt to offset any tendency to justify working on the materials for the tabernacle on the sabbath. In other words, building a place of worship was not a proper activity for God's day. The other reference in Numbers 15:32-36 sets the death penalty for gathering wood, but the context is that of defiant transgressors. The case in question is that of a fuel merchant who plies his trade on God's day. One other passage (Exodus 16:23) has been taken as excluding any preparation of food gathered the previous day, but this is to draw too much from the passage.

"These few general statements stand in marked contrast with the more than 1,000 rules built up by the Pharisees in the time of Jesus, and even their rules were not always as rigid and detailed as those of other Jewish sects.

"But detailed rules tend to sidetrack from the right recognition that the day belongs to the Lord. It is his gift for our good. Let us beware the encroachments that can so easily be made upon it by less important things. Let us grasp its great principle and apply it gladly and wholeheartedly for our spiritual profit. We can use it for worship, fellowship, spiritual enrichment - and how we need these! Also, as we put aside the ordinary activities of the week, we may enjoy spiritual, physical and emotional refreshment in activities which further the aim of the day. Avoiding business, shopping and the like, we are to be active in doing good.

"In some occupations there will be everyday work on this day, and rightly so (the cows must be milked, the hospitals must be open, police will be needed) for the sabbath is made for man and not the reverse. There will be particular difficulties in some occupations in our industrialised society, but obviously a Christian will not be anxious to cut into the opportunities for Christian worship by working overtime on Sunday without good reason.

"The present impoverishment of the church and our national direction owes much to neglect of God's provision of the Lord's Day. We are great on physical muscle-building and find great amounts of time and money for it. But what about our spiritual muscles? Consider the human restlessness characteristic of our time because God's rest is ignored. How important it is to raise our eyes heavenward! And will not the church find sufficient funds for the spread of the gospel if on the first day of the week - the day that reminds us of the destiny we have in Christ because of his love for us - we set aside as the Lord has prospered us (1 Corinthians 16:2)!

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(22.1 A Godly oath defined)

22.1 A lawful oath is a part of religious worship, wherein, upon just occasion, the person swearing solemnly calleth God to witness what he asserteth, or promiseth, and to judge him according to the truth or falsehood of what he sweareth.

Ward Translation

22.1 A lawful oath is a part of religious worship. On proper occasions the person swearing solemnly calls on God to witness what he declares or promises, and to judge him according to the truth or falsehood of what he swears.

**ANALYSIS WCF 22: 1-7**

1. Definition of an oath
2. Basis
3. Limits
4. Obligations
5. Definition of a vow
6. To whom made and in what manner
7. Limits

**Commentary**

The most common occasions for the use of oaths in our public worship are: (1) in baptism; (2) in church membership vows; (3) in the Lord’s Supper; (4) in marriage vows in wedding services; and (5) in ordination and installation services for church officers.

Ward says: “An oath is a solemn act in which God is invoked as witness and as judge of what is asserted or what is promised. WCF 21:5 has already stated that oaths are a part of religious worship. This is here reaffirmed.”

Shaw says: “An oath is a solemn act of religious worship, in which the person swearing calls God to witness his sincerity in what he asserts or promises, and to judge him according to the truth or falsehood of what he swears. When a person swears to facts past or present, this is called an assertory oath; when one swears that he will perform a certain deed or deeds in time to come, this is called a promissory oath. An oath may relate to matters civil or ecclesiastical, and, according to its matter, may be denominated a civil or ecclesiastical oath; but to whatsoever matter it may be applied, the oath itself retains its high place among the solemnities of religion.”

Hodge says: “A lawful oath consists in calling upon God, the occasion being of sufficient seriousness and importance, to witness the truth of what we affirm as true, or our voluntary assumption of an obligation to do something in the future -- with an implied imprecation of God’s disfavour if we lie or prove unfaithful to our engagements. This last is generally expressed by the phrase forming the concluding part of the formula of most oaths, “So help me God;” -- i.e., Let God so help me as I have told the truth, or as I will keep my promise.

Hence an oath is an act of supreme religious worship, since it recognizes the omnipresence, omniscience, absolute justice and sovereignty of the Person whose august witness is invoked, and whose judgment is appealed to as final.”

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Chapter 22 - Of Lawful Oaths and Vows

(22.2 How and whether we may swear an oath)

22.2 The name of God only is that by which men ought to swear, and therein it is to be used with all holy fear and reverence. Therefore, to swear vainly, or rashly, by that glorious and dreadful Name; or, to swear at all by any other thing, is sinful, and to be abhorred. Yet, as in matters of weight and moment, an oath is warranted by the Word of God, under the New Testament as well as under the Old; so a lawful oath, being imposed by lawful authority, in such matters, ought to be taken.

Commentary

It is not uncommon to hear sincere, Bible-believing Christians question or deny the validity of oath-making and -taking, based on their understanding of Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Ward says: “the view that Jesus’ words, ‘Swear not at all’ (Matthew 5:33-37) forbid Christians to take an oath in any circumstances is rightly rejected in the Confession. No doubt Christians should so speak that their simple yes means yes and their no means no. No doubt all vain and rash oath-taking should be avoided as well as the use of euphemisms for God which avoid the formal use of his name. No doubt in the world to come there will be no occasions for oath taking either. But we are not in the world to come yet, and there is nothing in the New Testament dispensation which even suggests a break in continuity in the use of oaths in appropriate circumstances as recognised in the Old Testament. God himself made a self-maledictory oath to confirm his word (Gen 15:9ff cf. Hebrews 6:13-16), Christ allowed himself to be put on oath (Matthew 26:63), and Paul’s life provides examples (Romans 1:9; 2 Corinthians 1:23). The lawfulness of oath taking per se was denied by some of the Anabaptists and by the Society of Friends (Quakers), and that denial is echoed today in some evangelical circles. Jesus’ words in their context deal with hypocritical oaths which seek to gain credit for our words while avoiding strict honesty.”

Shaw says: “An oath may be warrantably taken on weighty occasions, when imposed by lawful authority. The Quakers, and some others, deny the lawfulness of swearing an oath in any case, under the New Testament. But their opinion is refuted by a variety of arguments. An oath for confirmation is warranted by the third precept of the moral law; for while that precept prohibits the taking of God’s name in vain, it sanctions swearing by the name of God on lawful occasions. The practice is confirmed by numerous approved examples under the Old Testament. Abraham swore to Abimelech that he would not deal falsely with him.—Gen. xxi. 23, 24. A king of the same name desired that an oath might be between Isaac and him; and they swore one to another. - Gen. 2. xxvi. 31. In like manner Jacob swore to Laban (Gen. xxxi. 53); and Joseph swore to his father.–Gen. xlvii. 31. All these examples occurred before the Mosaic law was given to the Jews, and therefore an oath can be no peculiarity of the Mosaic dispensation. But that law expressly recognised the warrantableness of taking an oath (Lev. v. 1), and under that dispensation we have various examples of holy men swearing by the name of God. Thus Jonathan required David to swear unto him (1 Sam. xx. 17); and David also swore unto Saul.—1 Sam. xxiv. 21,22. The taking of an oath being no part of the judicial, or of the ceremonial law, it must be equally warrantable under the present dispensation, unless expressly prohibited in the New Testament. But there is much in the New Testament to confirm the practice. The Apostle Paul frequently appeals to God in these and similar expressions: “God is my witness:"—“I say the truth in Christ, I lie not”, (Rom. i. 9, ix. 1): “I call God for a record upon my soul.”—2 Cor. i. 23. Christ himself answered the question of the high priest, when he adjured him by the living God; which was the common form of administering an oath among the Jews. The writer to the Hebrews speaks of the oath which God swore to Abraham, “who, because he could swear by no greater, aware by himself; and he adds, “An oath for confirmation is an end of all strife” (Heb. vi. 13, 16); plainly showing that he sanctioned the practice. It must be evident, therefore, that our Saviour’s words (Matt. v. 34), “Swear not at all,” and the similar words of the Apostle James (v. 12), do not absolutely prohibit all swearing on necessary end solemn occasions; but only forbid the practice of swearing in common conversation, and particularly of swearing by creatures. It must be remarked, however, that an appeal to God in trivial matters, and the frequent and unnecessary repetition of the same oath, is a taking the name of God in vain. And it may also be observed, that as the lifting up of the hand is the usual mode of swearing mentioned in Scripture (Gen. xiv. 22; Rev. x. 5, 6), so it ought to be preferred; and all superstitious forms ought to be rejected.
Chapter 22 - Of Lawful Oaths and Vows

(22.3 Requirements in oath-taking)

22.3 Whosoever taketh an oath ought duly to consider the weightiness of so solemn an act, and therein to avouch nothing but what he is fully persuaded is the truth: neither may any man bind himself by oath to anything but what is good and just, and what he believeth so to be, and what he is able and resolved to perform.

Commentary

Hodge says: "The literal meaning of the Third Commandment is, "Thou shalt not take the name of thy God in that which is false" -- that is, to confirm an untruth. The command not to take a false oath, or any oath upon a trifling occasion, by implication carries with it the permission to call upon the God of truth to confirm the truth upon all worthy occasions. Hence the oath is enjoined in the Old Testament as a recognized religious institution. Deut. vi. 13; x. 20, etc. Christ himself, when put upon oath in the form common among the Jews, did not hesitate to answer. Matt. xxvi. 63, 64. Paul often appeals to God for the truth of his statements -- thus: "God is my witness;" "I call God for a record upon my soul." Rom. i. 9; 2 Cor. i. 23. In Heb. vi. 13 -- 18, Paul declares that God, in order "to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath;" and that, "because he could swear by no greater, he sware by himself."

"It is evident, therefore, that the words of our Saviour (Matt. v. 33 -- 37), "Swear not at all," cannot be intended to forbid swearing upon proper occasions in the name of the true God, but must be designed to forbid the calling upon his name in ordinary conversation and on trifling occasions, and the swearing by that which is not God.

"The proper occasions upon which an oath may be taken are all those in which serious and perfectly lawful interests are involved, and in which an appeal to the witness of God is necessary to secure confidence and end strife (Heb. vi. 16); and also whenever the oath is imposed by competent authority upon those subject to it. In the latter case, our Confession says that the taking the oath is a duty, and its refusal a sin.

"The oath, of course, both because of its nature as an act of divine worship and because of the effect designed to be attained by it -- namely, the establishment of confidence among men -- ought always to be administered and taken in a reverent manner, and with whatever outward action -- such as raising the hand, placing it upon the Scriptures or kissing them -- as by common consent is generally understood, by all parties and witnesses, to signify that the God appealed to is the true God of creation, of providence, and of the Christian revelation."

Shaw says: "An oath ought to be taken "in truth, in righteousness, and in judgment."--Jer. iv. 2. In truth; that is, with an entire correspondence between the sentiments of the mind and the words of the oath, in their common obvious meaning, and as understood by those who administer it; without any equivocation and mental reservation. To allow of mental reservation in swearing, as the Church of Rome in certain cases does, is to defeat the very end of an oath, to destroy all confidence among men, and to involve the swearer in the heinous sin of perjury. In righteousness; that is, in things lawful and possible for us at the time of swearing, and with a fixed intention to perform what we pledge ourselves to do. In judgement; that is, deliberately and reverently, well considering whether the matter of the oath be good and just, and whether the ends proposed be sufficient to justify us in interposing the glorious and dreadful name of God for a pledge of the truth of our declarations."
Chapter 22 - Of Lawful Oaths and Vows

(22.4 The way in which a Godly oath must be taken)

22.4 An oath is to be taken in the plain and common sense of the words, without equivocation, or mental reservation. It cannot oblige to sin; but in anything not sinful, being taken, it binds to performance, although to a man’s own hurt. Nor is it to be violated, although made to heretics, or infidels.

Commentary

Ward says: “An oath to commit sin cannot be lawful and to keep such an oath is to compound the sin of making it in the first place (cf. Mark 6:23,26). Oaths which are not in themselves sinful but which result in loss are to be kept for truth’s sake and for God’s sake. Roman Catholic moral theology allows mental reservation and equivocation in a just cause. If the other party does not know that the words are used with a private or unusual meaning that is his fault, is the argument. As Rome identifies the voice of the church with the voice of God, and claims to be the moral arbiter of the individual conscience, the just cause becomes the advancement of the church’s interests and the dictates of the church will justify setting aside an oath. Rome’s all too frequent practice of not keeping faith with heretics has ample illustration in history. So has the practice of Protestant ministers and elders subscribing statements of faith but teaching contrary to them.”

Shaw says: “A lawful oath binds to performance. Oaths engaging persons to what is sinful are in themselves null and void; and they who have rashly taken such oaths ought to repent of and renounce them, instead of adding the sin of making them to the sin of keeping them, as Herod most wickedly did in beheading John the Baptist for the sake of his oath.—Mark vi. 23, 26. But a lawful oath is binding, though the performance may be prejudicial to a man’s temporal interest; and it is the character of a good man, that though "he swears to his own hurt, he changes not."—Pa. xv. 4. It is a detestable principle of the Romish Church, that "faith is not to be kept with heretics."

Hodge says: “The oath is always to be interpreted and kept sacred by the person taking it, in the sense in which he honestly believes that it is understood by the person who imposes it. It is evident that if the government, the judge, the magistrate, or a private fellow-citizen, require an oath from us for their satisfaction, and if we put a private sense upon the matter upon which we invoke the witness of God different from that which we know they understand by it, that we deceive them intentionally; and, by calling God to witness our truth while we are engaged in the very act of a lie, we commit the sin of perjury.

“The obligation of the oath arises (1.) out of the original and universal obligation to speak the truth and to keep faith in all engagements; (2.) and, in addition to this, our obligation to honour God, and to avoid dishonouring him by invoking his witness to a falsehood; (3.) the profanity involved in suspending our hopes of God’s favour upon the truth of that which we know and intend to be false.

“An oath cannot bind to that which is in itself unlawful, because the obligation of the law is imposed upon us by the will of God, and therefore takes precedence of all obligations imposed upon us by the will of men or by ourselves; and the lesser obligation cannot relieve from the greater. The sin is in taking the oath to do the unlawful thing, not in breaking it. Therefore Luther was right in breaking his monastic vows. Neither can an oath to do that which is impossible bind, for its impossibility is an expression of the will of God.

“But an oath to do what is in itself right and binding imposes an additional obligation to perform it -- the obligation imposed by the law, and the obligation voluntarily assumed by ourselves.”
Chapter 22 - Of Lawful Oaths and Vows

22.5 A vow is of the like nature with a promissory oath, and ought to be made with the like religious care, and to be performed with the like faithfulness.

Commentary

Ward says: “An oath is a promise between parties which God is called upon to witness. A vow is a promise made to God as the other party (and the witness), and is to be kept for the same reasons as an oath - for truth’s sake and for God’s sake.”

Hodge says: “The vow is a promise made to God. In the oath, the parties are both men, and God is invoked as a witness. In the vow, God is the party to whom the promise is made. It is of like nature with an oath, because we are bound to observe them on the same grounds -- because of our obligation to truth, and because of our obligation to reverence God. Lightly to vow on a trifling occasion, or having vowed to fail to keep it, is an act of profanity to God.

“As in the case of the oath, we have abundant Scriptural sanction for the vow. Eccles. v. 4; Ps. 1xxvi. 11; 1 Sam. i. 11; and the case of Paul, Acts xviii. 18. Reception of either of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper involves very sacred and binding vows to God; and the same is repeated whenever in prayer, orally or in writing, we formally or informally renew our covenant promises to God. Thus a vow, as any other promise, may bind generally to loyal obedience or specially to some particular action.

“A vow cannot bind to do that which is unlawful or impossible, for reasons before explained in relation to an oath; nor when made by a child or other person under authority and destitute of the right to bind themselves of their own will. Num. xxx. 1 -- 8. Nor can it continue to bind in cases in which its continued observance is found clearly to be inconsistent with our spiritual interests; for then it is certain that God does not wish it, and a promise can never bind when the party to whom it is made does not desire it kept.

“When the matter of the vow is not unlawful, but morally indifferent, the vow is binding; but experience abundantly proves that to accumulate such obligations is very injurious. The Word of God in the Scriptures imposes upon us by his authority all that it is his will or for our interest for us to observe. The multiplication of self-imposed duties dishonours him, and greatly harasses us and endangers our safety. Vows had better be restricted to the voluntary assumption and promise to observe, with the help of divine grace, duties imposed by God and plainly revealed in the Scriptures.”

Shaw says: “A vow is a solemn promise made to God, and may be either personal or social. Although a vow is “of the like nature with a promissory oath,” yet they admit of being distinguished. In an oath, man is generally the party, and God is invoked as the witness; in a vow, God is both the party and the witness. A vow is to be made to God alone; and, therefore, to make vows to saints departed, as Papists do, is superstitious and idolatrous. Vows ought to be entered into voluntarily, and in the exercise of faith, or in dependence upon the grace of Christ for enabling us to perform them.—Phil. iv. 13; 2 Cor. xii. 9.”
Chapter 22 - Of Lawful Oaths and Vows

(22.6 How a Godly Vow is to be made)

22.6 It is not to be made to any creature, but to God alone: and, that it may be accepted, it is to be made voluntarily, out of faith, and conscience of duty, in way of thankfulness for mercy received, or for the obtaining of what we want, whereby we more strictly bind ourselves to necessary duties; or, to other things, so far and so long as they may fitly conduce thereunto.

Commentary

Hodge says: "As in the case of the oath, we have abundant Scriptural sanction for the vow. Eccles. v. 4; Ps. 1xxxvi. 11; 1 Sam. i. 11; and the case of Paul, Acts xviii. 18. Reception of either of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper involves very sacred and binding vows to God; and the same is repeated whenever in prayer, orally or in writing, we formally or informally renew our covenant promises to God. Thus a vow, as any other promise, may bind generally to loyal obedience or specially to some particular action.

“A vow cannot bind to do that which is unlawful or impossible, for reasons before explained in relation to an oath; nor when made by a child or other person under authority and destitute of the right to bind themselves of their own will. Num. xxx. 1 -- 8. Nor can it continue to bind in cases in which its continued observance is found clearly to be inconsistent with our spiritual interests; for then it is certain that God does not wish it, and a promise can never bind when the party to whom it is made does not desire it kept.”

More generally, JI. Packer says: "Truth in relationships, especially between Christians, is divinely commanded (Eph. 4:25; Col. 3:9), and truth-telling is specified as integral to authentic godliness (Ps. 15:1-3). God forbids lying, deception, and malicious misrepresentation (Exod. 20:16; Lev. 19:11). Jesus traces lying back to Satan (John 8:44), and those who, like Satan, lie in order to deceive and damage others are condemned in Scripture as being ungodly in a hateful and horrible way (Pss. 5:9; 12:1-4; 52:2-5; Jer. 9:3-6; Rev. 22:15). One way of acknowledging the dignity of our neighbor, who is God’s image-bearer, is to recognize that he or she has a right to the truth. Truth-telling, which shows proper respect for facts, for our neighbor, and for God, thus becomes a fundamental element in true religion and in true love of one’s neighbor.

“Expounding the ninth commandment, God’s prohibition of false witness (Exod. 20:16), in terms of the principle that the negative implies the positive (i.e., the commandment requires whatever is needed to avoid what it forbids), the Westminster Larger Catechism (Q.144) says:

The duties required are, the preserving and promoting of truth between man and man, and the good name of our neighbor, as well as our own; appearing and standing for the truth; and from the heart, sincerely, freely, clearly, and fully, speaking the truth, and only the truth, in matters of judgment and justice, and in all other things whatsoever.

“Oaths are solemn declarations that invoke God as a witness of one’s statements and promises, inviting him to punish should one be lying. Scripture approves oath-taking as appropriate on solemn occasions (Gen. 24:1-9; Ezra 10:5; Neh. 5:12; cf. 2 Cor. 1:23; Heb. 6:13-17), though at the time of the Reformation the Anabaptists declined the practice as part of their rejection of involvement in the life of the secular world. They appealed to Jesus’ condemnation of oaths devised and designed to deceive as if it were a rejection of oath-taking as such rather than a call for honest speech and a warning against the temptation to use words that give a false impression, with manipulation and exploitation as one’s real purpose (Matt. 5:33-37; cf. James 5:12).

“Vows to God are the devotional equivalent of oaths and must be treated with equal seriousness (Deut. 21:23; Eccles. 5:4-6). What one swears or vows to do must at all costs be done (Ps. 15:4; cf. Josh. 9:15-18). God requires us to take seriously not only his words but our own as well. However, “no man may vow to do anything forbidden in the Word of God, or what would hinder any duty therein commanded” (Westminster Confession XXII.7)."
22.7 The kinds of vows we can't make

No man may vow to do anything forbidden in the Word of God, or what would hinder any duty therein commanded, or which is not in his own power, and for the performance whereof he hath no promise of ability from God. In which respects, popish monastical vows of perpetual single life, professed poverty, and regular obedience, are so far from being degrees of higher perfection, that they are superstitial and sinful snares, in which no Christian may entangle himself.

Ward's Translation

No one may vow to do anything forbidden in the word of God, anything which would hinder any duty it commands, or anything not in his power to do and for the performance of which he has no promise of ability from God. In this connection, vows of perpetual celibacy, poverty and obedience within Roman Catholic monastic orders are not degrees of higher perfection but are actually superstitial and sinful snares in which no Christian may entangle himself.

Commentary

Ward says: "However, vows to perform special tasks with the aim of securing something from the Lord or expressing thanks for mercies received are much more likely to lead to difficulty, given that special revelation has ceased. It is possible to entangle oneself very easily by falling into will-worship, and also into erroneous conceptions of the Christian life. The monastic orders cited are examples of this. Paul made a vow (Acts 18:18) although its nature is not clear."

Hodge says: "Persons may bind themselves by a vow, either to necessary duties or to other things not expressly required, so far and so long as they may lie conducive to the better performance of these duties. But no man may vow to do anything which is either unlawful or which is not in his own power, and for the performance of which he has no promise of ability from God.

"A vow has an intrinsic obligation, distinct from the obligation of the law of God. In the law, God binds us by his authoritative command; in a vow, we bind ourselves by our own voluntary engagement. To represent a vow as laying no new or superadded obligation on the conscience, or to maintain, as some Popish writers do, that a vow does not bind us in moral duties commanded by the law of God, because our vow cannot add any obligation to his law, is manifestly absurd. It is equally contrary to Scripture and to the common sense of mankind. The law of God obliges; this is the primary obligation. But a vow also obliges; this is the secondary obligation. And subordinate things oppose not each other. The performance of vows is frequently and strictly enjoined in the Word of God. "When thou shalt vow a vow unto the Lord thy God," says Moses, "thou shalt not slack to pay it; for the Lord thy God will surely require it of thee; and it would be sin in thee."—Deut. xxiii. 21; see also Eccl. v. 4, Ps. l. 14, lxxvi. 11."

Having come to the end of your reading of the Westminster Confession's chapter on Lawful Oaths and Vows, reflect a little on why such a subject would feature in a 17th confessional document. Why would they have included this topic among major theological issues like Christology, justification, predestination, the Lord's Supper, etc.?

Further, reflect on the various ways that vows feature in Christian worship. Have you made vows as a part of a worship service? What are the occasions for vows in the regular worship of the church?
Chapter 23 - Of the Civil Magistrate

(23.1 God's appointment of, and the purpose and power of Civil Government)

23.1 God, the supreme Lord and King of all the world, hath ordained civil magistrates, to be, under him, over the people, for his own glory, and the public good: and, to this end, hath armed them with the power of the sword, for the defense and encouragement of them that are good, and for the punishment of evil doers.

23.1 With a view to his glory and the public good, God, the world's supreme Lord and King, has ordained civil authorities answerable to himself to be over the people. To accomplish his aims, God has armed them with the power of the sword to defend and encourage those who are good and to punish evil doers.

ANALYSIS WCF 23:1-4

1. Civil Government
   a. divine institution
   b. divine purpose
   c. coercive power

2. Public Duties and the Christian
   a. a lawful vocation
   b. may engage in war

3. Duty of State to Church and Religion
   a. what the state may not do
   b. what the state may do

4. Civil Allegiance

Commentary

Ward says: "The Bible does not specify any particular form of civil government such as monarchy, republic or democracy but it does affirm that the ultimate foundation of human government is in God's appointment. The 'powers that be' are not independent of God or equal with God, but under God. In this sense all civil authority might be called constitutional, for the purposes of the institution are linked to the institution itself, and all exercising the office are accountable. No countenance is given to tyranny or despotism, nor to the tyranny of the 51% found in much modern democracy which erroneously bases the source of what is right in the will of the majority. It is far more important to have the rule of right law - the law of God - than 'one man one vote'. On the other hand, in the multitude of counsellors is safety (Proverbs 11:14), hence Calvinism has tended to favour republicanism over monarchy, and an electoral base broadened beyond the few nobility. It is worth noting that the institution of civil government is not founded in grace but in nature before sin. The Fall and God's redemptive purpose introduce new factors which must be taken into account in fulfilling its basic and unchanged purpose of God's glory and the public good. The expression 'public good' should not be defined as 'secular interests' rather than spiritual, nor moral interests as contrasted with spiritual. The division of life into 'sacred' and 'secular' sounds neat but is untenable."

Hodge says: "Civil government is a divine institution, and hence the duty of obedience to our legitimate rulers is a duty owed to God as well as to our fellow-men. Some have supposed that the right or legitimate authority of human government has its foundation ultimately in 'the consent of the governed,' 'the will of the majority,' or in some imaginary 'social compact' entered into by the forefathers of the race at the origin of social life. It is self-evident, however, that the divine will is the source of all government; and the obligation to obey that will, resting upon all moral agents, the ultimate ground of all obligation to obey human governments. This is certain -- (1.) Because God is the Creator and absolute Possessor of all men. (2.) Because he has formed their constitution as intelligent, morally responsible, free agents, and is the Lord of the conscience. (3.) Because he is the supreme moral Governor of all moral agents, and because his all-embracing moral law of absolute perfection requires all that is morally right of every kind, and forbids all that is morally wrong. Hence every moral obligation of every kind is a duty owed to God. (4.) Because God has constituted man a social being in his creation, and has providentially organized him in families and communities, and thus made civil government an absolute necessity. (5.) Because as the providential Ruler of the world God uses civil government as his instrument in promoting the great ends of redemption in the upbuilding of his kingdom in the world. (6.) This is explicitly affirmed in Scripture: 'There is no power but of God; the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever, therefore, resisteth the power resisteth the ordinance of God.' Rom. xiii. 1, 2. To the good the magistrate is "the minister of God for good," and to the evil he is a "minister of God, an avenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil." Rom. xiii. 4."
Chapter 23 - Of the Civil Magistrate

(23.2 Christian Involvement in Civil Government, and Just War)

23.2 It is lawful for Christians to accept and execute the office of a magistrate, when called thereunto: in the managing whereof, as they ought especially to maintain piety, justice, and peace, according to the wholesome laws of each commonwealth; so, for that end, they may lawfully, now under the New Testament, wage war, upon just and necessary occasion.

Rowland Ward

Translation

23.2 It is lawful for Christians to accept and carry out the duties of public office when called to do so. In carrying out such tasks they ought to take care to uphold piety, justice and peace in accordance with the sound laws of each commonwealth they serve, and in so doing the New Testament permits them to engage in war if there is just and necessary cause.

Commentary

Ward says: “It is not unlawful for Christians to be involved in political and civil affairs. It is improper for Christians to make their religion so private that the interests of piety, justice and peace are not furthered. Not everyone is called to work as a public official, for God gives gifts which fit people for various vocations. The Christian fitted for such tasks should not shirk from the important work of guiding the affairs of national life, and the institutions of welfare and justice. Contrary to the Anabaptists, who held that the holding of civil office was sinful for Christians, in theory none should be better fitted for such work.

‘The use of the force of law or arms is a legitimate function of civil government. War is really an aspect of the power of the sword. The concept of a just war is of long standing in Christian theology dating particularly from Augustine (354-430). Just war principles are usually stated as: having just cause, being declared by a proper authority, possessing right intention, having a reasonable chance of success, and the end being proportional to the means used. The Confession gives no countenance to individuals engaging in war on their own initiative, but places the responsibility in the hands of the civil powers. Calvinists have held that inferior civil rulers may act against a tyrannical superior if necessity demands. War always has evil consequences. The concept of a just war is not meant to justify war but to bring it under the control of justice. In this way it limits and restricts war into definite bounds.

‘From a Biblical perspective it is hard to conclude that a Christian or anyone else must be a pacifist, although all ought to be peacemakers. A Christian may scruple a particular war in the light of the knowledge he has, and such a person should be accommodated, rather than forced to act against his conscience. In reality it often seems the otherwise: the pacifist is given exemption, but the objector to a particular war is not.”

J. I. Packer says: “Civil government is a means ordained by God for ruling over communities. It is one of a number of such means, including ministers in the church, parents in the home, and teachers in the school. Each such means has its own sphere of authority under Christ, who now rules the universe on his Father’s behalf, and each sphere has to be delimited by reference to the others. In our fallen world these structures of authority are institutions of God’s “common grace” (kindly providence), standing as a bulwark against anarchy, the law of the jungle, and the dissolution of ordered society.

“Because civil government exists for the welfare of the whole society, God gives it the power of the sword (i.e., the lawful use of force to enforce just laws: Rom. 13:4). Christians must acknowledge this as part of God’s order (Rom. 13:1-2). But civil authorities ought not to use this power to persecute the adherents or nonadherents of any particular religion, or to entrench any form of evil.”

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Chapter 23 - Of the Civil Magistrate

(23.3 The Role of the State in relation to the Church)

23.3 Civil magistrates may not assume to themselves the administration of the Word and sacraments; or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven; or, in the least, interfere in matters of faith. Yet, as nursing fathers, it is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the church of our common Lord, without giving the preference to any denomination of Christians above the rest, in such a manner that all ecclesiastical persons whatever shall enjoy the full, free, and unquestioned liberty of discharging every part of their sacred functions, without violence or danger. And, as Jesus Christ hath appointed a regular government and discipline in his church, no law of any commonwealth should interfere with, let, or hinder, the due exercise thereof, among the voluntary members of any denomination of Christians, according to their own profession and belief. It is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the person and good name of all their people, in such an effectual manner as that no person be suffered, either upon pretense of religion or of infidelity, to offer any indignity, violence, abuse, or injury to any other person whatsoever: and to take order, that all religious and ecclesiastical assemblies be held without molestation or disturbance.

Original Language of this section

23.3 (1646) The civil magistrate may not assume to himself the administration of the word and sacraments, or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven: yet he hath authority, and it is his duty, to take order, that unity and peace be preserved in the Church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire; that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed, all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed; and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered, and observed. For the better effecting whereof, he hath power to call synods, to be present at them, and to provide, that whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God. [*This section was removed and replaced in the American version]*

Rowland Ward's Translation of the Original

23.3 (1646) The civil authorities may not take to themselves the administration of the word and sacraments, or interfere in the spiritual government of the church, yet they have authority, and it is their duty, to see to it that unity and peace be preserved in the Church, the truth of God be kept pure and complete, all blasphemies and heresies are suppressed, all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed, and all the ordinances of God duly established, administered and observed. To carry out these ends more effectively in circumstances where the church is disorganised or corrupt, the civil authorities have power to call synods, to be present at them, and to insist that whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God.

Commentary on the Original

Ward says: “The civil authorities may not treat the church as a department of state or take on the role of the spiritual officers Christ has appointed in his church. The church has a distinct government and this is not to be usurped or interfered with by the civil authority. The original text allowed the civil power to call synods, but this right the Church of Scotland, when adopting the Confession in 1647, expressly limited to ‘kirk[s] not settled or constituted in point of government.’ The last sentence in the above text has been modified accordingly.

“The American Presbyterian church reworded this section (also 20:4 & 31:1-2) in 1788 to affirm a three fold duty of the state in reference to religion: (1) to protect the church; (2) to protect citizens; (3) to ensure freedom of assembly [text above]. However, the duty of the state to encourage the unity of the church and the maintenance of the truth is not asserted, and all denominations of Christians are placed on an equal basis.”
Chapter 23 - Of the Civil Magistrate

(23.4 The Christian’s Duty to the State)

23.4 It is the duty of people to pray for magistrates, to honor their persons, to pay them tribute or other dues, to obey their lawful commands, and to be subject to their authority, for conscience’ sake. Infidelity, or difference in religion, doth not make void the magistrates’ just and legal authority, nor free the people from their due obedience to them: from which ecclesiastical persons are not exempted, much less hath the pope any power and jurisdiction over them in their dominions, or over any of their people; and, least of all, to deprive them of their dominions, or lives, if he shall judge them to be heretics, or upon any other pretense whatsoever.

Commentary

Hodge says: “These sections teach that the Church and the State are both divine institutions, having different objects and spheres of action, different governments and officers, and hence, while owing mutual good offices, are independent of each other. This is opposed --

1. To the Papal doctrine of the relation of the State to the Church. According to the strictly logical ultramontane view, the whole nation being in all its members a portion of the Church universal, the civil organization is comprehended within the Church for certain ends subordinate to the great end for which the Church exists, and is therefore ultimately responsible to it for the exercise of the authority delegated. Hence, whenever the Pope has been in a condition to vindicate his authority, he has put kingdoms under interdict, released subjects from their vow of allegiance, and deposed sovereigns because of the assumed heresy or insubordination of the civil rulers of the land. Our Confession teaches that the State is in its sphere entirely independent of the Church, and that it has civil jurisdiction over all ecclesiastical persons, on the same principles and to the same extent it has over any other class of persons whatsoever.

2. The statements of these sections are opposed also to the Erastian doctrine as to the relation of the State to the Church, which has prevailed in all the nations and national churches of Europe. This doctrine regards the State as a divine institution, designed to provide for all the wants of men, spiritual as well as temporal, and that it is consequently charged with the duty of providing for the dissemination of pure doctrine and for the proper administration of the sacraments and discipline. It is the duty of the civil magistrate, therefore, to support the Church, to appoint its officers, to define its laws, and to superintend their administration. Thus in the State Churches of Protestant Germany and England the sovereign is the supreme ruler of the Church as well as of the State, and the civil magistrate has chosen and imposed the confessions of faith, the system of government, the order of worship, and the entire course of ecclesiastical administration.

In opposition to this, our Confession teaches that religious liberty is an inalienable prerogative of mankind (chapter xx.), and that it involves the unlimited right upon the part of every man to worship God according to the dictates of his own conscience. Hence, ecclesiastical rulers, although endowed with the power of the keys, are not allowed to apply any civil pains or disabilities to coerce men to obey the laws they administer. Hence, also, the civil magistrate, while bound to protect church members and ecclesiastical organizations in the peaceful enjoyment of their rights and discharge of their functions, is nevertheless allowed no official jurisdiction whatever in the affairs of the Church. The same person may be a civil magistrate and a church member. In the one case he is a ruler -- in the other a subject. Or the same person may be a civil magistrate and a church officer, and rule at the same time in both spheres. But his jurisdiction in each case would have entirely independent grounds, objects, spheres, modes and subjects of operation.

These sections also teach that obedience to civil magistrates, when making or executing laws within the proper sphere of the State, is a duty binding upon all the subjects of government for conscience’ sake by the authority of God. This follows directly from the fact, as before shown, that civil government is an ordinance of God -- that the powers that be are ordained of God for certain ends; hence obedience to them is obedience to God. It follows hence -- (1) That this obedience ought to be from the heart and for conscience’ sake, and not of constraint. Hence we will pray for and voluntarily assist our rulers, as well as render mere technical obedience. (2.) Rebellion is a grievous sin, since it is disobedience to God, and since it necessarily works such permanent physical ruin and social demoralization among our fellow-men. The limit of this obligation to obedience will be found only when we are commanded to do something contrary to the superior authority of God (Acts iv. 19; v. 29); or when the civil government has become so radically and incurably corrupt that it has ceased to accomplish the ends for which it was established. When that point has unquestionably been reached, when all means of redress have been exhausted without avail, when there appears no prospect of securing reform in the government, itself, and some good prospect of securing it by revolution, then it is the privilege and duty of a Christian people to change their government -- peacefully if they may, forcibly if they must.
24.1 Marriage is to be between one man and one woman: neither is it lawful for any man to have more than one wife, nor for any woman to have more than one husband, at the same time.

Commentary

Ward says: “Marriage is constituted by the public commitment of a man and a woman to a many faceted life-long union so that a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife and the two become one flesh. So called homosexual marriages are an abomination to God. The rule for marriage is monogamy.

“The polygamy which existed among the patriarchs, such as Abraham, Jacob and David, is generally not expressly condemned in Scripture, but it is contrary to the foundational character of marriage as given in Genesis 2:24. Scripture is normally content to show us that polygamy violates God’s norm by indicating the bitter consequences in the families of those who practised it.”

J. I. Packer says: “Marriage is an exclusive relationship in which a man and a woman commit themselves to each other in covenant for life, and on the basis of this solemn vow become “one flesh” physically (Gen. 2:24; Mal. 2:14; Matt. 19:4-6).

“Marriage was ordained for the mutual help of husband and wife, for the increase of mankind with a legitimate issue, and of the church with an holy seed; and for preventing of uncleanness [sexual license and immorality]” (Westminster Confession XXIV.2; Gen. 2:18; 1:28; 1 Cor. 7:2-9). God’s ideal for marriage is that the man and the woman should experience mutual completion (Gen. 2:23) and share in his creative work of making new people. Marriage is for all mankind, but it is God’s will that his own people should only marry fellow believers (1 Cor. 7:39; cf. 2 Cor. 6:14; Ezra 9–10; Neh. 13:23-27). Intimacy at its deepest is impossible when the partners are not united in faith.

“By using Christ’s relationship to his church to illustrate what Christian marriage ought to be, Paul highlights the husband’s special responsibility as his wife’s leader and protector, and the wife’s calling to accept her husband in that role (Eph. 5:21-33). The distinction of roles does not, however, imply that the wife is an inferior person: as God’s image-bearers, the husband and the wife have equal dignity and value, and they are to fulfill their role relationship on the basis of a mutual respect that is rooted in recognition of this fact.”

1. The nature of marriage
   a. between a man and a woman
   b. monogamous
2. The four-fold purpose of marriage
   a. mutual help
   b. procreation
   c. godly children
   d. preservation of purity
3. The general rule and the Christian rule
   a. in general all entitled to marry
   b. informed consent necessary
   c. Christians should marry only ‘in the Lord’
4. Forbidden degrees
5-6. The ending of a marriage
   a. by death
   b. by adultery (porneia)
   c. by irremediable desertion
Chapter 24 - Of Marriage and Divorce

(24.2 The Purpose of Marriage)

24.2 Marriage was ordained for the mutual help of husband and wife, for the increase of mankind with legitimate issue, and of the church with an holy seed; and for preventing of uncleanness.

Rowland Ward Translation

24:2 God ordained marriage for the mutual help of husband and wife, for the legitimate increase of mankind, to provide the church with holy children, and for the prevention of moral impurity.

Commentary

Ward says: “The Church of Rome tends to stress that procreation is the fundamental purpose of marriage, whereas the Protestant position is that it is only one of the purposes, and then not the primary one. However, one should not be too ready to wish to prevent the birth of children, since children are to be regarded as a blessing from the Lord. God does not bypass the family, a relationship he established, in his gracious dealings with us. His promise is to be the God of his people and their children.

“The fundamental nature of marriage is intended to be such that children are raised in the knowledge of their Creator. Properly speaking, however, marriage cannot have been ordained at creation for the increase of the church since the church comes after creation and the fall. But given human sin and the provision of redemption, the ideal of marriage is properly realised only where there is community of faith between the parties.”

Shaw says: “Marriage is an ordinance of God, designed for the mutual help of husband and wife, for the honourable propagation of the human race, and for other important purposes connected with the comfort and improvement of the species. It was instituted before the entrance of sin, and must, therefore, be a holy ordinance, and no hindrance to men in the service of God. The Lord saw that “it was not good for Adam;” even in Paradise, “to be alone,” and that “there was no help meet for him” to be found among all the other creatures. He was therefore pleased to form the woman from his side, as “bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh,” and, having brought her to Adam, he joined them together as husband and wife, and thus gave an example to be imitated by their descendants. As God made no more than one woman for Adam, he thereby plainly indicated his will that every man should have only one wife, and every woman only one husband. In this manner Malachi explains the fact, when he says: “And did not he make one?”—namely one woman—“yet had he the residue of the Spirit. And wherefore one? That he might seek a godly seed.”—Mal. ii. 15. Polygamy was first introduced by Lamech, an abandoned descendant of Cain (Gen. iv. 19), and, though practised, by the patriarchs, and other pious men, it is contrary both to the divine institution and to the law of nature. As God in his providence maintains so near an equality between the males and females born into the world, it is manifestly his intention that one woman only should be assigned to one man; and wherever polygamy has prevailed, it has been attended with numerous evils, both to the parties themselves and to the public. It promotes jealousies and contentions among the wives of the same husband; produces distracted affections, or the loss of all affection in the husband himself; tends to the degradation of the female character, to the neglect of children, and manifold other evils. The words of Christ (Matt. xix. 9) plainly imply a prohibition of polygamy; for if “whosoever putteth away his wife [except it be for incontinence], and marrieth another, committeth adultery,” he who marrieth another without putting away the first, must be no less guilty of adultery.”
Chapter 24 - Of Marriage and Divorce

December 29

(24.3 Who may marry, and whom?)

24.3 It is lawful for all sorts of people to marry, who are able with judgment to give their consent. Yet it is the duty of Christians to marry only in the Lord. And therefore such as profess the true reformed religion should not marry with infidels, papists, or other idolaters: neither should such as are godly be unequally yoked, by marrying with such as are notoriously wicked in their life, or maintain damnable heresies.

Commentary

Hodge says: "Our Confession teaches that marriage is lawful for all sorts of people who have intelligence sufficient to consent. The Romish Church allows that marriage is lawful for the great mass of men as a concession to the weakness of the flesh, but maintains that a life of celibacy is both meritorious and more conducive to spiritual elevation. Hence they say a life of celibacy is recommended by Christ (Matt. xix. 10-12) as one of his evangelical counsels, by the observance of which supererogatory merit may be attained; and hence the Romish Church imposes it as a universal and imperative obligation upon its clergy.

"This all Protestants deny for the following reasons: – (1.) God created man male and female, and constituted the relation of the sexes, and ordained marriage in Paradise when man was innocent. Marriage, therefore, must be purely good, and a means of good in itself, except when abused by man.

“(2.) The relation is honoured in being selected as the highest earthly type of the grandest heavenly fact -- namely, the mystical union of the eternal Word with his Bride the Church. Eph. v. 28 -- 33.

“(3.) Reason and experience unite in showing that the relation is the best conceivable condition for the bringing out and educating the noblest moral instincts and faculties of human nature. The best and noblest men of the Old World and the New have been formed in the family.

“(4.) The vast experiment of celibacy on the part of the priesthood and of the monastic houses of the Roman Church proves our position by showing the impoverishing and degrading tendency of the opposite system. The true meaning of what is taught by our Saviour, Matt. xix. 10 -- 12, and by Paul, 1 Cor. vii. 1-40, is, that the unmarried are exposed to less worldly care than the married; therefore, that in times of persecution and public danger, and with reference to some special kind of service to which God providentially calls a man, it may be both his interest and his duty not to marry. It appears evident that, even in the present age, some kinds of missionary service both at home and abroad might be more efficiently accomplished for the glory of God and the good of men if our younger ministers would consent to regard marriage as less than absolutely essential, and in this respect also "seek' first the kingdom of God and his righteousness."

“The principle that professors of the true should not intermarry with professors of a false religion, and that true believers should not intermarry with the ungodly, touches not that which is essential to the validity of marriage, but that which belongs to its perfection, and brings in question not the reality of the marriage when formed, but the propriety of forming it. Paul teaches that if one of the parties of a previous marriage becomes a Christian, the other remaining a heathen, the Christian brother or sister remains bound by the marriage-tie as before, unless the heathen party voluntarily abandon them, and so dissolve the relation, when the Christian is no longer bound. 1 Cor. vii. 12 -- 15. On the same principle, the marriages at present so common between the converted and the unconverted are unquestionably valid, and to be respected as such.

“It nevertheless remains true that true Christians owe it both to Christ and to their own souls not to contract such alliances. For how can one who possesses the mind and the spirit of Christ, whose affections are as a practical fact set upon things above, whose motives, aims and aspirations are heavenly, become one flesh and heart, dwell in the most intimate of all possible communion, with a soul dead in trespasses and sins? (See 2 Cor. vi. 14-18.) If such a union is formed, it must follow, either that the sacred ordinance of marriage is desecrated by a union of bodies where there is no union of hearts, or in the intimate fellowship of soul with soul the believer will be greatly depressed in his inward, spiritual life, and greatly hindered in his attempts to serve his Master in the world. 1 Cor. vii. 39.”
Chapter 24 - Of Marriage and Divorce

(24.4 What are the degrees of kinship within which one may not marry?)

24.4 Marriage ought not to be within the degrees of consanguinity or affinity forbidden by the Word. Nor can such incestuous marriages ever be made lawful by any law of man or consent of parties, so as those persons may live together as man and wife.

Commentary

Ward says: “There are also natural restrictions arising from blood or family relationships. The idea of laws against incest is to provide safeguards against genetic problems which have emerged since the early history of the human race and to guard the freedom and purity of family life by ensuring the integrity and intimacy of family life is realised. (Cf. V. Poythress, The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses, 1991, pp.216-218) Sometimes the restrictions on marriage partners among the nations are far more narrow than the Bible. For example, as at 1991 Korea still maintains the Confucian practice inherited from China.

“The Scripture prohibits marriage to anyone closer than a first cousin whether by blood or marriage. Although the law on this subject forms part of the Mosaic code, these restrictions rest on a more general basis since the Gentiles were judged for their violation before the law was given to Israel through Moses (Lev 18:24-30). They cannot be explained simply as restrictions created by the Jewish law.

“The last sentence in the text ["The man may not marry any of his wife’s kin who are nearer in blood than he may of his own, nor the woman of her husband’s kin who are nearer in blood than of her own.”] was scrupled in the 19th century (particularly in the 1870s), and in most cases Presbyterian denominations deleted or no longer enforced it so that marriage to a deceased wife’s sister is not rejected. Some have supposed the relevant Scripture (Lev 20:21) is addressing the case of bigamy (cf. Lev 18:18), although the apparently lighter penalty (’they will be childless’) compared to other illicit relations (’they must be cut off’) does not seem to fit this supposition. Perhaps the lighter penalty reflects the fact that marriage to a deceased wife’s sister, while forbidden is not in the same category as the others, and thus may continue as an irregular but not invalid union with divine disapproval. The fact that the Levirate law (Deut 25:5-10) allowed, and even required, a relative to marry a deceased brother’s wife if she was childless, suggests that the union is not invalid per se, although forbidden as a rule and only allowed in special cases.

Hodge says: “I. INCEST consists of sexual intercourse between parties forbidden by the divine law to marry, because of their relationship. Marriage between these parties is impossible; and no matter what may be the provisions of human laws or the decisions of human courts, such pretended marriages are void ab initio -- invalid in essence as well as improper and injurious. Since the degrees of relationship within which marriage is excluded differ in nearness, so the crime of incest differs, according to these varying degrees, from the highest to the least measure of criminality. The obligation to avoid intermarriage between near blood-relations is a dictate of nature as well as of the Word of God.

“The only law on this subject in the Scriptures is the Levitical law recorded in Lev. xviii. 6 -- 23; xx. 10 -- 21. If this law is still binding, it carries with it the principle that it is incest for a man to cohabit with any one of his deceased wife’s relations nearer in blood than it is lawful for him to do of his own. If this law is not binding now, there is no other law of God remaining on the subject of incest except the law of nature.

“The Greek and Roman Catholic Churches agree in holding that this law is still binding, since the reason of the law rests upon permanent relationships, and not upon any special circumstances peculiar to society among the Jews. All branches of the Protestant Church -- Episcopal, Lutheran, and Presbyterian -- have maintained the same principle in their Confessions of Faith or canons of discipline. It is asserted in these sections of our Confession. But a great diversity of sentiment and practice prevails in different parts of our [the American] Church, on this subject, and for the most part the enforcement of this rule has been left to the discretion of the majority of each local church court. Several efforts have been made, in 1826 and 1827, and 1843, 1845, and 1847, to have this section of this chapter changed, but without effect.”
Chapter 24 - Of Marriage and Divorce

(24.5 Divorce and Remarriage, in the case of Adultery or Fornication)

24.5 Adultery or fornication committed after a contract, being detected before marriage, giveth just occasion to the innocent party to dissolve that contract. In the case of adultery after marriage, it is lawful for the innocent party to sue out a divorce: and, after the divorce, to marry another, as if the offending party were dead.

Commentary

Packer says: “God hates divorce (Mal. 2:16), yet he provided a procedure for it that would protect the divorced wife (Deut. 24:1-4); this, said Jesus (Matt. 19:8), was “because your hearts were hard.” The natural way to understand his teaching in Matthew 5:31-32 and 19:8-9 is that marital unfaithfulness (the sin of adultery) destroys the marriage covenant and warrants divorce (though reconciliation would be preferable); but he who divorces his wife for any lesser reason becomes guilty of adultery when he remarries and drives her into adultery in her remarriage. In this Jesus is simply stating the principle that all cases of divorce and remarriage involve disruption of God’s idea for the sexual relationship. He answered the question, When is divorce lawful? by saying that divorce is always deplorable (Matt. 19:3-6), but he did not deny that hearts continue to be hard; so that divorce, though always in itself an evil, may sometimes be permitted on a lesser-evil basis. Paul says that one who has become a Christian and then been deserted by an unbelieving partner is not “bound” (1 Cor. 7:15). This evidently means that he or she may regard the relationship as finished. Whether this should be held to confer right of remarriage has been disputed, and Reformed opinion has long been divided on the matter. The Westminster Confession (XXIV.5-6) states with cautious wisdom what most Reformed Christians, reflecting on the Scriptures quoted above, have down the centuries found themselves agreed on regarding divorce.”

Wards says, of Remarriage after divorce – “The Church of Rome, which holds a sacramental view of marriage, teaches that remarriage of a person so divorced can only occur when the guilty party is dead. On this theory the divorce is really a permanent separation. But the Bible knows nothing of marriage obligations when a marriage is lawfully ended. One is either married or one is not. Against this view it is argued that Matthew 5:31-32, which also affirms the legitimacy of divorce on the grounds of porneia, goes on to say that whoever is divorced, other than on grounds of porneia, is made to commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery; hence, even the unjustly divorced have no remedy. But the passage must not be understood apart from its context. The passage says that the innocent party is made to commit adultery by the divorce, and this can only be because such a person will normally remarry and thus, judged by the position established at creation, she commits adultery and so does whoever marries her. Remarriage by the innocent party is not literally adulterous. However, as remarriage would not have occurred apart from the sin of the man who divorced his wife improperly, Jesus draws out the consequences of his wrong attitude to God and to his wife in a striking way: far from keeping God’s requirement by attention to forms, the wrong attitude compounds the departure from God’s norm for marriage, and in this sense the normally to be expected remarriage of the rejected wife can be described as adulterous. Jesus does not say that she cannot remarry, in fact he implies that she will, but this situation comes about because of the first husband’s sin. A necessary implication of the passage is that a husband who divorces his wife for marital unfaithfulness is free from the sin of adultery should he remarry. Are we to suppose that a faithful woman cast out of her marriage by an unjust husband is in a less favourable position? Certainly not.

“In short, whereas the scribes and Pharisees stressed the correct documentation Jesus stressed the fundamental principle, confined the grounds for divorce to sexual immorality, and showed how a loose approach to divorce inevitably furthered the evil.

Remarriage by a guilty party

The question of remarriage by a guilty party who repents is one requiring careful consideration. Obviously reconciliation is impossible if the divorced spouse has remarried. The prospect of a fresh marriage is suggested by the need to direct the sexual instinct into proper channels, and by the claims of Christian compassion and forgiveness.
24.6 Although the corruption of man be such as is apt to study arguments unduly to put asunder those whom God hath joined together in marriage: yet, nothing but adultery, or such wilful desertion as can no way be remedied by the church, or civil magistrate, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage: wherein, a public and orderly course of proceeding is to be observed; and the persons concerned in it not left to their own wills, and discretion, in their own case.

Commentary

Ward says: “This section cautions against finding excuses for divorce, requires divorce proceedings to be properly regulated, and affirms that divorce on the grounds of irremediable desertion (the so-called ‘Pauline privilege’) is also legitimate. Jesus had addressed the position of marriage among the covenant nation, but the spread of the Gospel among all nations presented new situations.

“In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul deals with various matters concerning marriage in a very down to earth way. Verses 17-24 state the general principle of remaining in the social situation one has when one becomes a Christian. In verses 1-7 Paul insists that deprivation of sexual relations by wives who think this a spiritual course is wrong. It leads the men into immorality. Paul insists that there is to be no abuse of sexual relations, no manipulation, no depriving, no abstinence except on the basis of mutual agreement for a limited time for purposes of prayer. In verses 8-9 he says that it is perfectly proper for widowers and widows to remain as they are. Marriage is an appropriate course for any who are already sinning. In verses 10-11 Christian married couples are not to divorce. Separation may sometimes be appropriate but reconciliation is always to be the aim. In verses 12-16, concerning mixed marriages, divorce is not to be sought simply on the ground of religious difference. The believer’s life (not so much the words) should be eloquent so that the unbeliever may be won for Christ. But if the unbeliever will not remain the believer is not bound in such cases. Paul’s emphasis is that everything possible should be done to maintain the marriage but if the unbeliever does leave let him do so - the marriage is at an end. A parallel passage in Romans 7:2 shows Paul’s usage where he says a wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives.

“Thus we conclude that wilful desertion by an unbeliever, after the spouse has become a believer, with the intent the desertion be final allows the formal termination of the marriage. This being so remarriage is possible for the one deserted. The principle of 1 Corinthians 7:15 would seem capable of extension to cases of wilful and permanent desertion in situations not precisely of the kind noted by Paul, for example by a professing Christian who deserts a spouse (and repudiates thereby his or her Christian profession), or cases of such cruelty that there is a virtual repudiation of the marriage vows. But one should always approach marriage on the basis that there is no easy way out, that vows are to be kept, and that work and effort is needed to build and strengthen any relationship. The Bible does not approve divorce; in fact, God says he hates it (Mal 2:16), but he does allow it as a means of controlling one of the evils sin has brought.”

John Murray says: “We may not discount or underestimate the fact that marriage is the divine provision for the sex impulses with which God has endowed us. These impulses are not ignoble; they are implanted by God, ingenerated in our nature. Since God had created man with these sex instincts, there would have been an imperfection in God’s creation if he had not made provision for the satisfaction of these impulses. It is not in line with biblical thought to underestimate the motivation and urge to marriage arising from the sex impulse in the more restricted sense of desire for the sexual act. There is a wholesome candour about the way in which Paul develops and applies that truth. His treatment is a protest against the false asceticism which has too frequently been entertained, practised, and propagated in connection with the sexual urge. Ironically enough this asceticism lies close to the grossest kinds of sexual indulgence.” [John Murray, Principles of Conduct (1957), 77]
Chapter 25 - Of the Church

(25.1 What and who is the church)

25.1 The catholic or universal church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all.

Rowland Ward Translation

25.1 The catholic or universal church is not visible to us for it consists of the whole number of the elect, who have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ, its Head. This church is the bride, the body, the fulness of him who fills all in all.

Commentary

Ward says: “Christians confess belief in ‘one holy catholic church.’ This one church embraces all of God’s elect in every age and place, but until the consummation it will not be gathered into one place under its Head. Neither the elect gathered to date, nor their totality at the consummation, is seen by us, and so the holy catholic (=universal) church is believed in as an article of our faith. ‘Let all our views, impressions, and conduct in regard to the visible church, and its different branches, be regulated by some reference to this great invisible spiritual reality, - that thus we may be led to estimate the purity and efficiency of visible churches mainly by a respect to the spiritual character and attainments of their individual members.’ [William Cunningham, Historical Theology, 26]”

A. A. Hodge says: “The word catholic means universal, and therefore is the proper title of the true Church of Christ, viewed as one body, composed of many members, existing in different places and at different times; and is consequently very improperly applied to that corrupt and schismatical body, the Church of Rome.

“The word in the New Testament corresponding to the English word church is ecclesia (ekklesia); this is derived from the word kalein (kalein), to call, to call out, and thus constitute a separate body; which word is used to express the effectual call of the Holy Spirit, whereby he brings dead souls to life in the world of regeneration. Rom. viii. 28 -- 30; 1 Pet. ii. 9; v. 10. The word “church,” therefore, is a collective term including the whole body of the "called" (kletoi) or the "elect" (eklektos), or of "believers." Rev. xvii. 14; 1 Cor. i. 2, 24.

"To this Church, or collective body of the "effectually called," all the promises of the Gospel are addressed. It is said to be the "pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Tim. iii. 15); the "body," and "fulness of Christ" (Eph. i. 22, 23); "the Bride, the Lamb's wife" (Rev. xxi. 2, 9); and it is affirmed that "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Matt. xvi. 18

“As every part of this entire body possesses the common nature of the whole, the common term "Church" is naturally applied sometimes to the entire body, of all nations and ages, conceived of as a unit (Col. i. 18); and sometimes to the church of a particular province or city, as "the church of the Thessalonians," or "the church of Ephesus" (2 Thess. i. 1; Rev. ii. 1); or in the plural for the several individual churches of a province, as "the churches in Asia," or "the churches of Macedonia," or of "Galatia" (1 Cor. xvi. 1; 2 Cor. viii. 1; Rev. i. 4); and sometimes the word is applied to designate some Christian family, as "the church in the house of Priscilla and Aquila." Rom. xvi. 5; Col. iv. 15; Philem. 2.

“Our Confession teaches in these sections -- That there is a collective body, comprising all the elect of God of all nations and generations, called the Church invisible. The fact that there is such a body must be believed by every person who believes that all men, of every age and nation since Adam, who received Christ and experienced the power of his redemption, are to be saved, and that all who reject him will be lost. That this entire body in its ideal completeness, not one true member wanting, not one false member marring its symmetry, has been constantly present to the mind of God from eternity, must be believed by all persons who acknowledge either or both the divine foreknowledge and foreordination.
25.2 The visible church defined

The visible church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.

Commentary

Ward says: "If the catholic church from one viewpoint is invisible, from another it is visible in the association of believers here on earth. The contrast with section 1 is not between two churches, one invisible and one visible, but between the holy catholic church (section 1) and the church militant on earth (section 2). There is only one church but it must be viewed under these two aspects if justice is to be done to the teaching in Scripture. 'We can avoid the inconsistency of admitting on the one hand, that hypocrites and evil men may be in the purest churches on earth, and yet, on the other hand, claiming for the Church militant all the attributes of faultlessness and perfect holiness, only when we make the former statement with reference to the visible Church and the latter with reference to the Church as invisible.' [John Macpherson, The Doctrine of the Church in Scottish Theology (Edinburgh 1903), 70] The relevance of this position for the refutation of the Roman Catholic view is evident. It refutes the Separatists and Independents too, for they recognised only the visible church and made it consist of the regenerate only.

"The wording of this section implies the essential unity of the covenant of grace and of the church in both Old and New Testaments. The church on earth is the covenant people of God, and embraces those who profess the true religion and their children in accordance with the covenant promise.

"The church is catholic because it does not consist of individual competing parts but parts of one whole, a world-wide empire. 'The Churches of the different nationalities constitute the provinces of this empire; and though they are so far independent of each other, yet they are so one, that membership in one is membership in all, and separation from one is separation from all... This conception of the Church, of which, at least in some aspects, we have practically so much lost sight of, had a firm hold of the Scottish theologians of the seventeenth century.' [James Walker, The Theology and Theologians of Scotland, 95-6]

"The reference to those who profess the true religion must not be taken as a mere declaration, but as a serious, apparently sincere profession evidenced in apparent subjection to Christ. Such a person is admitted a member of the church not because the church judges him or her to be regenerate (that would require men to judge the genuineness of spiritual graces), but because the profession is appropriate for one who is regenerate, called of God and not of man.

"The children of the faithful are also members of the church. The Westminster Directory for Public Worship (January 1645) states: 'The promise is made to believers and their seed, and the seed and posterity of the faithful, born within the church, have by their birth, interest in the covenant, and right to the seal of it.' The following implications may be drawn: (1) Those baptised in infancy who do not profess faith in their maturity, do not have a right to baptism for their children. Their unbelief disqualifies them from that privilege. [There has not been full consistency of practice on this point. Some situations (as in the Scottish Highlands) reflect an historical or cultural development which requires sensitive pastoral handling.] (2) Presbyterians, possibly because of a certain application of the visible/invisible church distinction, have usually only reckoned church membership by communicants. However, the baptized but not yet professing members of the church should also be recorded on the church membership roll, as is the practice of Reformed churches in Europe.

"This section also affirms the importance of the church. 'When we say that out of the visible church there is no ordinary possibility of salvation, we guard against the error of supposing that connection with the church as an institution necessarily secures salvation, and equally against the notion that God regards the use of his own appointed means of grace as of slight importance. By sovereign power he can work savingly apart from those means, but ordinarily he does not.' (John Macpherson) The church is not so bound to the marks of the church (see below) that all outside it - such as unbaptised believers, unbaptised infants of believers, and the wrongfully excommunicated, are lost, but church membership is still a matter of the utmost seriousness."
Chapter 25 - Of the Church

(25.3 The church’s mission, means and marks)

25.3 Unto this catholic visible church Christ hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world: and doth, by his own presence and Spirit, according to his promise, make them effectual thereunto.

Ward’s Translation

25.3 In order to gather and perfect the saints in this life to the end of the world, Christ has given to this universal visible church the ministry, the message to be proclaimed, and the ordinances of God to be observed. By his own presence and Spirit, according to his promise, he makes these means effective for this gathering and perfecting of the saints.

Commentary

Ward says: “The preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments are indicated as two means by which believers are gathered and built up in their faith. Thus they are also marks of the church. Church discipline, the third mark commonly affirmed by the Reformed church, is treated in WCF 30 cf. 20:4; 15:6. The statement, that to the church ‘Christ has given... the ministry’, reminds us that in a real sense the church exists in the effective call of God before the ministry. The question of the validity of a ministry, so much regarded by those who define the church in terms of a claimed succession of valid orders from apostolic times, is secondary to the existence of a body of believers promoting and maintaining the fundamental principles of Christian truth according to the apostolic writings. It is granted that ordination by existing spiritual rulers is the regular means of setting apart new ministers, but this is not essential to validity if, in God’s providence, a body of Christians have no opportunity to secure a ministry in the regular way and instead acknowledge as a minister one suitably gifted in their congregation [cf. William Cunningham, Historical Theology I, 31].”

Packer says: “Each local church is an outcrop of the one universal church and will embody the nature of that church as the Father’s regenerate family, Christ’s ministering body, and a fellowship sustained by the Holy Spirit. The world contains self-styled churches with doubtful or false credentials (e.g., the Unitarian churches and the Mormon church, both of which deny the Trinity). Furthermore, congregations that once held the faith unambiguously have been known to lapse to the point where it is hard to know if they are churches anymore. Discernment is therefore necessary. As they opposed the papacy and separated from the Roman Catholic church, the Reformers needed to determine the marks of the true church. From Scripture, they found the answer in terms of two criteria.

1. The faithful preaching of the Word of God. This means that the group in question teaches from Scripture the essentials of the Christian gospel. Denials of the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the sin-bearing atonement, and justification by faith, for example, link aberrant contemporary groups with the docetic separatists, whose denial of Incarnation and Atonement (1 John 4:1-3) caused John to say, “They did not really belong to us” (1 John 2:19).

2. The right use of the sacraments. This means that baptism and the Lord’s Supper are seen and explained as setting forth the gospel so as to evoke, confirm, and strengthen faith in Christ. Superstitions that stifle faith by turning the sacraments into magic rites are intolerable. Such superstitions strike at churchly identity in a radical way, as does anything else that obstructs faith in Christ. Reception into the visible church is part of what being baptized means; confirmation of one’s place in it is part of what sharing in the Lord’s Supper means. Right use of the sacraments involves an element of church discipline whereby professions of faith are tested and public behavior is reviewed.

Ideally, a Christian congregation will exhibit other marks of its identity alongside these minimal two. Luther specified the keys of discipline (Matt. 16:19), an authorized ministry (Acts 14:23; 20:28), public worship (Heb. 10:25), and suffering under the cross (Acts 14:22; 20:29). The Reformed churches specified a functioning system of discipline and have spoken of discipline as a third criterion or mark of the visible church (Titus 1:13; 2:15; 3:10). These additional marks are not, however, essential in the way that the minimal two are. A church that lacks them is certainly deficient, but it would not be true to say that it is not a church at all.
Chapter 25 - Of the Church

(25.4 The purity of the church)

25.4 This catholic church hath been sometimes more, sometimes less visible. And particular churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them.

Commentary

Hodge says: "1. Since the catholic or universal visible Church consists of all the professors of the true religion in the world, and of all the particular ecclesiastical organizations which continue loyal to the Head, and maintain doctrines essentially sound, it must necessarily follow that the Church as a whole is in any age more or less visible, and any particular constituent church more or less pure in proportion -- (1.) To the purity of the doctrine they profess and the worship they maintain; (2.) To their zeal and spiritual character and energy; and (3.) To the purity of their membership maintained by discipline. In proportion as these are all advanced in perfection, and prevail generally throughout the whole body, in the same degree will the entire Church appear more visibly discriminated from the world and manifest in her entire outline. In the same measure, also, will every individual ecclesiastical organization be pure -- that is, free from heterogeneous elements -- and consecrated to the accomplishment of the ends for which it is designed.

"2. It follows, also, from the very nature of the visible Church and its condition in this world, that its purity is a matter of degree, varying at different times and in different sections. The teaching of Scripture as to the nature of the kingdom under the present dispensation (Matt. xiii.), the nature of many yet imperfectly sanctified, and the universal experience of the churches, lead us to the conclusion that the very purest churches are yet very imperfect, and will continue so to the end, and that some will become so corrupt as to lose their character as true churches of Christ altogether. This was the case with the ancient Church under the reign of Ahab, when the children of Israel had apostatized from the service of the true God to such an extent that Elijah thought he was the only one left faithful. Even in that state of affairs the Lord declared, "Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal." 1 Kings xix. 18. Even more entire deterioration has happened to the ancient churches founded by the apostles in the East and by their successors in Northern Africa. The churches which acknowledge the supremacy of the Bishop of Rome have abandoned the faith and obscured the glory of their Lord in one direction, while many professedly Protestant churches -- as the English and American Socinians and the German Rationalists -- have made an equal apostasy in another.

"The Church of Rome maintains that the promise of Christ secures the infallible orthodoxy and purity of the visible organization, in subjection to apostolically-ordained bishops, to the end of the world. But the Church whose infallible orthodoxy and purity is guaranteed by the divine promise is not outward visible organization or succession of bishops or priests; it is the particular Church of no nation or generation, but it is the true invisible body of the elect or of true believers of all nations and ages. That it is so is proved -- (1.) From the fact that for eighteen hundred years the promise has been fulfilled in the sense we have defined, but has never been fulfilled in the sense the Romish Church demands. They have themselves led the defection from the faith and practice of the apostolic Church. And among Romanists and Protestants alike, visible ecclesiastical organizations are continually changing their characters and relations to the truth. (2.) Several of the Epistles are addressed to "the Church," and the salutations explain that phrase by the equivalents "the called," "the saints," etc. See the salutations of First and Second Corinthians, Ephesians, Colossians, First and Second Peter, and Jude. The same attributes are ascribed to the members of the true Church in the body of the Epistles. 1 Cor. i. 30; iii. 16; vi. 11; Eph. ii. 3 -- 8, 19 -- 22; Col. i. 21, 22; ii. 10; 1 Pet. ii. 9. (3.) The attributes ascribed to the true Church prove it to be spiritual, and, in the sense explained, invisible, and not an outward organized succession. Eph. v. 27; 1 Pet. ii. 5; John x. 27; Col. i. 18, 24.

"3. It follows, nevertheless, from the relation which the visible Church sustains to the invisible Church, that since, according to divine promise, the latter can never entirely fail from the earth (Matt. xvi. 18), so likewise, however the former may be obscured by heresies or lessened by defection, it can never be entirely wanting. Wherever the true Church is, it will be more or less visible; not in proportion, however, to the size or pretension of the organization with which it may be associated, but in proportion to the purity of its faith and the spiritual activity and fruitfulness of its membership."
Chapter 25 - Of the Church

(25.5 The imperfection and preservation of the church)

25.5 The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated, as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan. Nevertheless, there shall be always a church on earth, to worship God according to his will.

Commentary

Ward says: "The assertion that the purest churches are subject to impurity does not mean that there is an absolutely pure church which, however, is liable to fall. It means that the purest church is still only relatively pure because evil is ever mixed with good, and the striving to do all things according to Christ's word always falls short. Errors of greater or lesser significance will be present. Errors can multiply, and the lampstand can be taken away. Compare the case of English Presbyterian churches which descended into Unitarianism in the 18th century, or churches dominated by modernism in the 20th century.

"The marks of the church (pure preaching of the word, sacraments rightly administered, scriptural discipline maintained) are important tests for judging whether or not a church is true. We cannot deny the name of church to a body which strives to maintain the truth of God and holds fast to the fundamental truths of the word of God. True unity exists when all such churches recognise each other and strive more and more to fight against Satan and come to a fuller understanding of Christ's will in Scripture: a Reformed church is always reforming.

"The mere presence of some errors or abuses will not be sufficient to cause us to withdraw from a church. The nature of the errors, the insistence with which they are advocated, and the freedom or otherwise we have from compliance, will be relevant in deciding whether or not we can remain in the body. Certainly, withdrawal is not to be contemplated lightly. The multiplicity of denominations today makes it easier for one to find a spiritual home, but we must not think that denominational differences are unimportant, or that different churches are equally acceptable if they hold basic fundamentals. The church is called to contend earnestly for the faith, to teach all Christ commanded, and there must be readiness to submit to Scripture in everything.

"A church may fall to a level which makes it unlawful for a believer to hold communion with it, even though it be admitted that it contains true believers. John Calvin writes: "However, when we categorically deny to the papists the title of the church, we do not for this reason impugn the existence of churches among them. Rather, we are only contending about the true and lawful constitution of the church, required in the communion not only of the sacraments (which are the signs of profession) but also especially of doctrine. Daniel [Dan 9:27] and Paul [2 Thess 2:4] foretold that Antichrist would sit in the Temple of God. With us, it is the Roman pontiff we make the leader and standard bearer of that wicked and abominable kingdom. The fact that his seat is placed in the Temple of God signifies that his reign was not to be such as to wipe out either the name of Christ or of the church. From this it is evident that we by no means deny that the churches under his tyranny remain churches. But these he has profaned by his sacrilegious impiety, afflicted by his inhuman domination, corrupted and well-nigh killed by his evil and deadly doctrines, which are like poisoned drinks. In them Christ lies hidden, half buried, the gospel overthrown, piety scattered, the worship of God nearly wiped out. In them, briefly, everything is so confused that there we see the face of Babylon rather than that of the Holy City of God. To sum up, I call them churches to the extent that the Lord wonderfully preserves in them a remnant of his people, however woefully dispersed and scattered, and to the extent that some marks of the church remain - especially those marks whose effectiveness neither the devil's wiles nor human depravity can destroy. But on the other hand, because in them those marks have been erased to which we should pay particular regard in this discourse, I say that every one of their congregations and their whole body lack the lawful form of the church." (Institutes, 4: ii, 12)

"Similarly, the 17th century Presbyterian Scottish writers, men of no narrow focus, abhorred schism, regarded the Lord's Table as the table of the universal church not of one part of the church, recognised baptism by Roman Catholic priests, and the discipline of even corrupted churches, if it was not in the matter of the corruption itself. This admirable ecumenical ideal, combined as it was with the utmost jealousy for purity of doctrine, worship and discipline, is worthy of imitation.

"The continuance of the church of Christ is guaranteed by the election of God, the redemption of Christ and the activity of the Holy Spirit. Particular churches may disappear, but the church persists, even if sometimes reduced so as to be a small remnant."
25.6 There is no other head of the church but the Lord Jesus Christ. Nor can the pope of Rome, in any sense, be head thereof.

Commentary

Ward says: “The first two sentences of this section are agreed by all Presbyterians. The last sentence in the original form as footnoted, which derives from the Irish Articles (1615) art. 80, has been scrupled over the past century, although without real basis in my view. Some also think (and rightly) that the Confession’s statement conflicts with the ideals of tolerance and inclusive ecumenicity presently popular. Some churches have deleted these words and others have reworded them (see below).

“The identification of the papacy with antichrist goes back many centuries before the Reformation, with not only dissidents and heretics but notable churchmen using the term when they wished to castigate abuse of power by the Bishop of Rome.

“While no real objection can be raised against the original expressions if the scope and context is kept in mind, the wording given in the modernised text indicates the essence of the original text in a straightforward way not likely to be misconstrued. For the doctrinal positions of the Confession in 25:6 are (1) that the Pope is not the head of the church; (2) that he exalts himself as if he were, which (3) proves him to be activated by the anti-Christian spirit which seeks religious veneration (Matt 23:8-9) and persecutes the godly (Rev 13:6), and so illustrates the truth of the prediction of apostasy in the church (2 Thess 2:3-8-9). Sadly, all of this is still true today.

“The man of sin passage was regarded by virtually all 17th century Protestants as referring to a movement of error in history, under the guise of friendship to Christ, that had come to dominate in the organised church. Its seed-bed is in the heart of any who do not sincerely embrace the authority of Christ in his word, yet profess to be his friends, and its outgrowth is evident not only in the Papacy but in apostate Protestantism and the like. The lurid pictures of popular imagination must be put to one side.

“The reformers did not teach that the Church of Rome is no church at all, and this section of the Confession distinguishes the church and the papacy as the quotation from Calvin on pages 228-229 also illustrates. Nor is the possibility of change for the better in Rome excluded by the antichrist identification, since ‘the breath of Christ’s mouth’ (2 Thess 2:8 cf. Is 11:4), that is, the truth of the Gospel, overcomes the apostasy, although the complete elimination of error in the church under the guise of truth awaits Christ’s return.

“Where the language of 2 Thess 2 is fittingly applied to the papacy is evident, but that one is thereby committed to a detailed scheme of prophetic interpretation is not implied. This follows from the fact that the context is ‘The Headship of the Church’ not ‘The Interpretation of Prophecy’, from our knowledge that the framers of the Confession did not intend to insert debatable elements in it, and from the distinction between the interpretation of a text as referring to apostasy and its application to a particular manifestation. Thus, those who agree that the Papal system is anti-Christian but regard the Biblical passages as having their further fulfilment in a future individual are not prevented from subscribing the Confession. The present writer does not favour this futurist position on exegetical grounds, and it was not at all usual among 17th century Protestants either, but he admits that it may be held consistently with the Confession, if errors such as dispensationalism are not held with it.

“The Presbyterian Church in the United States (the Southern Church) rewrote the section in 1939 so as to read: The Lord Jesus Christ is the only head of the church, and the claim of any man to be the vicar of Christ and the head of the church, is without warrant in fact or in Scripture, even anti-Christian, an usurpation dishonouring to the Lord Jesus Christ. With the exception of the words ‘even anti-Christian’ this was virtually identical to an earlier modification by the Northern Church.
Chapter 26 - Of the Communion of the Saints

(26.1 How believers in Christ are joined to one another)

26.1 All saints, that are united to Jesus Christ their head, by his Spirit, and by faith, have fellowship with him in his graces, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory: and, being united to one another in love, they have communion in each other's gifts and graces, and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man.

ANALYSIS WCF 26:1-3
1. Its foundation
2. Its practical expression
3. Its qualifications

Commentary

Ward says: "The communion of saints is not a matter only of the life to come when we will enjoy the fellowship of other believers. The reality of fellowship here and now with other believers by virtue of union with Christ is the subject of this chapter. It follows on naturally from the teaching about the church in WCF 25. The fellowship or communion of which this chapter speaks is not simply on a spiritual level but is worked out in very practical ways too. We are able to have, and desire to have, this fellowship with other believers, because of the new relationship which we have to Christ, and the workings of his grace in our lives."

Hodge adds: "COMMUNION is a mutual interchange of offices between parties, which flows from a common principle in which they are united. The nature and degree of the communion will depend upon the nature and intimacy of the union from which it proceeds.

This chapter teaches: -- 1. Of the union of Christ and his people. 2. The fellowship between him and them resulting therefrom. 3. The union between the true people of Christ growing out of their union with him. 4. The communion of saints growing out of their union with each other. 5. The mutual duties of all who profess to be saints with regard to all their fellow-professors.

1. All saints are united to the Lord Jesus. We need to know what is the foundation and what is the nature of this union, and how it is established.

(1.) As to the foundation of the union subsisting between the true believer and the Lord Jesus, the Scriptures teach that it rests in the eternal purpose of the Triune God, expressed in the decree of election (we were "chosen in him before the foundation of the world," Eph. i. 4), and the eternal covenant of grace formed between the Father and his Word as the mediatorial head of his people, treating with the Head for the members, and with the members in the Head, and providing for their salvation in him. John xvii. 2, 6.

(2.) As to the nature of this union of the believer with Christ, the Scriptures teach -- (a.) That it is federal and representative, whereby Christ acts in all things as our federal Head, in our stead, and for our benefit. Hence our legal status is determined by his, and his rights, honours, relations, all are made ours in copartnership with him. (b.) That it is a vital and spiritual union. Its actuating source and bond is the Spirit of the Head, who dwells and works in the members. 1 Cor. vi. 17; xii. 13; 1 John iii. 24; iv. 13. Hence our spiritual life is derived from him and sustained and determined by his life, which we share. Gal. ii. 20. (c.) That it is a union between our entire persons and Christ, and therefore one involving our bodies through our souls. 1 Cor. vi. 15, 19.

(3.) As to the manner in which this union is established, the Scriptures teach that the elect, having been in the divine idea comprehended under the headship of Christ from eternity, are in time actually united to him -- (a.) By the powerful operation of his Spirit, whereby they are "quickened together with Christ" Eph. ii. 5; which Spirit evermore dwells in them as the organ of Christ's presence with them, the infinite medium through which the fulness of his love and life, and all the benefits purchased by his blood, pass over freely from the Head to the members. (b.) By the actions of faith upon their part, whereby they grasp Christ and appropriate him and his grace to themselves, and whereby they ever continue to live in him and to draw their resources from him. Eph. iii. 17.

This union is illustrated in Scripture by the relation subsisting between a foundation and its superstructure (1 Pet. ii. 4 -- 6); a tree and its branches (John xv. 5); the members of the body and the head (Eph. iv. 15, 16); a husband and wife (Eph. v. 31, 32); Adam and his descendants. Rom. v. 12-19.
Chapter 26 - Of the Communion of the Saints

(26.2 How believers’ union is to be expressed)

26.2 Saints by profession are bound to maintain an holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God, and in performing such other spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification; as also in relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities and necessities. Which communion, as God offereth opportunity, is to be extended unto all those who, in every place, call upon the name of the Lord Jesus.

Commentary

Ward says: "The two areas in which this fellowship is shown are the spiritual and the temporal. It is to be noted that no restriction is placed on the obligation of extending fellowship to believers. We are to do good to all men, but especially to those of the household of faith. There is no sectarianism here, but all who are members of the family of God are to be recipients of our care. This includes fellow believers of different racial or social background as well as believers in other denominations than our own. Note the specific comment about worship, an important emphasis given the tendency to neglect the public means of grace."

Hodge says: "Hence true believers, all being united in one living body, sustain many intimate relations, and discharge many important offices for one another, which are summarily expressed by the general phrase, 'The communion of saints.'

"(1.) They have a common Head, and common duties with respect to him; a common profession, a common system of faith to maintain, a common gospel to preach, a common worship and service to maintain.

"(2.) They have a common life, and one Holy Ghost dwelling in and binding together in one the whole body. Hence they are involved in the ties of sympathy and identity of interest. One cannot prosper without all prospering with him -- one cannot suffer without all suffering with him.

"(3.) As they constitute one body in the eyes of the world, they have a common reputation, and are all severally and collectively honoured or dishonoured with each other. Hence all schisms in the body, injurious controversies, malignant representations of Christian by Christian, are self-defaming as well as wicked.

"(4.) The body of saints is like the natural body in this also, that, although one body, each several member is an organ of the Holy Ghost for a special function, and has his own individual difference of qualification, and consequently of duty. Hence, in the economy of the body, each member is to contribute his special function and his special grace or beauty, and has in his turn fellowship in the gifts and complementary graces of all the rest. Eph. iv. 11 -- 16; 1 Cor. xii. 4 -- 21. This shall be perfectly realized in heaven. John x. 16; xvii. 22.

"5. Since this is the union of all true believers with the Lord and with each other, and since, consequently, a "communion of saints" so intimate necessarily nourishes among true believers in proportion to their intelligence and their advancement in grace, it follows that all branches of the visible Church, and all the individual members thereof, should do all within their power to act upon the principle of the "communion of saints" in their intercourse with all who profess the true religion. If the Church is one, the churches are one. If all saints are one, and are embraced in this holy "communion," then all who profess to be saints should regard and treat all their fellow-professors on the presumption that they are saints and "heirs together with them of the grace of life." Think of it! In spite of all controversies and jealousies, one in the eternal electing love of God! -- one in the purchase of Christ's sacrificial blood! -- one in the beatifying indwelling of the Holy Ghost! -- one in the eternal inheritance of glory! Surely we should be also one in all the charities, sympathies, and helpful offices possible, in these short and evil days of earthly pilgrimage. These mutual duties are, of course, some of them public -- as between different evangelical churches -- and may of them private and personal. Many of them relate to the souls, and many also to the bodies of the saints. The rule is, the law of love in the heart, and the principles and examples of saints recorded in Scripture applied to the special circumstances of every individual case."
Chapter 26 - Of the Communion of the Saints

January 10

(26.3 What the communion of the saints does not entail)

26.3 This communion which the saints have with Christ, doth not make them in any wise partakers of the substance of his Godhead; or to be equal with Christ in any respect: either of which to affirm is impious and blasphemous. Nor doth their communion one with another, as saints, take away, or infringe the title or propriety which each man hath in his goods and possessions.

Commentary

Ward says: "Union with Christ is a fundamental Christian teaching. It is a union by covenant and representation and does not involve any confusion of persons as some mystical strains of teaching have held. Compare James Denny’s comment: ‘I would rather be found in Christ than lost in God.’ But as the covenant of marriage results in a personal relationship, so the covenant of grace means that ‘our life is bound up in the bundle of the life of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ’ (Thomas Goodwin), and the cardinal experiences of our Lord have a parallel in our experience. Christ dwells in us by his Spirit, but there is something ultimately mysterious about the mystical union of Christ and the believer.

Similarly, our fellowship with other believers does not mean that the individual is lost in the crowd. There was a voluntary sharing of property in the needy Jerusalem church (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35), but it was not a compulsory measure (Acts 5:4). The general principle of the New Testament is acceptance of the social position we have when we become believers (1 Cor 7:20), and recognition of the needs of others so that the whole body is built up, we being members one of another.

Waldron says: ‘If we are all one, why then is it the case that our property is not common? We must remind ourselves of the foundation. We are one in and through Christ. We are not one directly. Therefore our property first belongs to Christ and only through him to each other. Thus, for example, we have no right to demand of our brother his car. Rather, our attitude must be one of humility and thankfulness for all that we receive. We must respect the fact that our brother’s property belongs to him as a divine stewardship. We have no direct claim upon his goods. With that stewardship we have no right to interfere.’


Shaw says: "This section guards against two heretical opinions—the one relating to the saints’ communion with Christ; the other, to their communion with one another. Certain mystics have employed impious and blasphemous terms in reference to the saints’ union and communion with Christ, as if they were deified or christified. They have not scrupled to use the phrases of being "goaded in God," and "christed in Christ," and other expressions equally wild. In the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Anabaptists of Germany, among other absurd and dangerous tenets, contended for the necessity of a community of goods among Christians. This doctrine never made much progress in this country, and modern Anabaptists entirely reject it. In opposition to these extravagant notions, our Confession teaches: -

1. That the saints’ communion with Christ does not involve a participation of the substance of his Godhead, nor constitute an equality between him and them in any respect. The union that subsists between Christ and believers leaves them distinct persons; and the communion which believers have with Christ does not raise them to an equality with him in dignity. They cannot participate in his divine excellencies, which are incommunicable; neither can they share with him in the glory of his mediatory work. He had none to co-operate with him in that arduous work, and he alone must bear the glory; as the saints are not deified, neither are they exalted to be mediators and saviours in conjunction with Christ.

2. That the saints’ communion with one another does not take away or infringe upon the rights of private property. The perpetual obligation of the eighth commandment, the admonitions of the New Testament to charity and hospitality, the particular precepts addressed to the rich and to the poor—all plainly prove that, under the gospel, each man retains a property in his goods and possessions.

‘… There is no evidence that the conduct of the Church of Jerusalem was followed by any other Church, even in the apostolic age; but as far as it is an example of generous love triumphing over the selfish affections, and exciting men to pursue the welfare of others as their own, it is worthy to be imitated to the end of the world.”
Chapter 27 - Of the Sacraments

(27.1 What sacraments are)

27.1 Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ, and his benefits; and to confirm our interest in him: as also, to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the church, and the rest of the world; and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to his Word.

ANALYSIS WCF 27:1-5
1. Definition
   a. their origin
   b. their nature
   c. their purpose
2. Relationship between sign and thing signified
3. Effectiveness
   a. not inherent or dependent on intention
   b. depends on Spirit and the word
4. Number
5. Relationship of New to Old Testament sacraments

Ward says: “The word sacrament (something sacred) is a useful one to express biblical teaching, although it has had a varied meaning in church history. The first sentence succinctly states what is elaborated in the second sentence. The sacraments are not simply sacred things but sacred things instituted by Christ. As signs and seals of the covenant of grace they point to and confirm the vital truths of the Gospel. The sacraments also serve to mark off those who profess faith in Christ, and involve a vow of commitment to loyal service.”

Robert Shaw says: “The word sacrament is not found in the Scriptures, but is derived from the Latin language. It was used by the Romans to signify their military oath, or the oath by which soldiers bound themselves to be faithful to their general, and not to desert his standard; and it is supposed to have been applied to the symbolical institutions of the Church, because in these we, as it were, enlist in the service of Christ, the Captain of our salvation, and engage to follow him whithersoever he leads us. But it may be remarked, that the early Christian writers employed the term sacrament (sacramentum) as equivalent to the scriptural term mystery (mysterion); and in the Vulgate the latter word is always translated by the former. There is reason to think that the term mysteries was early applied to baptism and the Lord’s supper, partly because, under external symbols, spiritual blessings were veiled, and partly also on account of the secrecy with which Christians, in times of persecution, were obliged to celebrate them; and as the Latins used the word as synonymous with mystery, it has been thought that we are in this way to account for its application to these symbolical institutions.

The express institution of God is essentially requisite to constitute a sacrament. No ordinances ought to be observed in the Christian Church but such as have been appointed by Christ, her alone king and head. He only can have authority to institute sacraments, who has power to confer the blessings which are thereby represented and applied. No rite, therefore, can deserve the name of a sacrament, unless it bear the stamp of divine institution.

Socinians represent the sacraments as being merely solemn badges by which the disciples of Jesus are discriminated from other men. It is readily granted that they are badges of the disciples of Christ, by which they are distinguished from Jews, Mohammedans, and Heathens; but this is not their chief design. They are principally "signs and seals of the covenant of grace." Circumcision is expressly called a sign and seal of the righteousness of faith (Rom. iv. 11), and the same description is equally applicable to the sacraments of the New Testament. As signs, they represent and exhibit Christ and the blessings of the new covenant to us; as seals, they ratify our right to them, and confirm our faith.

The principal uses and ends of the sacraments are, to represent Christ and his benefits—to confirm the believer’s interest in Christ and his blessings—to distinguish between the members of the visible Church, and those that are without—and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to his Word.
Chapter 27 - Of the Sacraments

(27.2 The relation between the sign and what it points to or represents)

27.2 There is, in every sacrament, a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified: whence it comes to pass, that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other.

Commentary

Ward says: “The sign and the thing signified must not be identified as by those who teach baptismal regeneration. Still, there is a relationship between the outward sign and the spiritual blessing it represents so that the sacrament can be spoken of as if it were the grace represented, and vice versa. In short, the sacrament cannot be separated from the sign but nor may it be identified with them.”

Packer says: “Christ instituted two rites that his followers were to observe: baptism, a once-for-all rite of initiation (Matt. 28:19; Gal. 3:27), and the Lord’s Supper, a regular rite of remembrance (1 Cor. 11:23-26). These are called “sacraments” in the Western church, “mysteries” in the Eastern Orthodox church, and “ordinances” by some Protestants who see the other two words as tainted with unhelpful associations. Scripture has no category-word for these two rites and their Old Testament counterparts, namely circumcision of males as a rite of initiation (Gen. 17:9-14, 23-27) and the annual Passover as a rite of remembrance (Exod. 12:1-27). Biblical teaching, however, warrants classifying them all together as signs and seals of a covenant relationship with God.

“Sacrament is from the Latin word sacramentum, meaning a holy rite in general and in particular a soldier’s sacred oath of allegiance. Study of the rites themselves yields the concept of a sacrament as a ritual action instituted by Christ in which signs perceived through the senses set forth to us the grace of God in Christ and the blessings of his covenant. They communicate, seal, and confirm possession of those blessings to believers, who by responsively receiving the sacraments give expression to their faith and allegiance to God. The effect of receiving the sacraments is “to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the church and the rest of the world, and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to his word” (Westminster Confession XXVII.1).

“It was a medieval mistake to classify as sacraments five more rites (confirmation, penance, marriage, ordination, and extreme unction). In addition to their not being seals of a covenant relationship with God, they “have not like nature of sacraments with Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, for that they have not any visible sign or ceremony ordained of God” (Thirty-Nine Articles XXV).

“The sacraments are rightly viewed as means of grace, for God makes them means to faith, using them to strengthen faith’s confidence in his promises and to call forth acts of faith for receiving the good gifts signified. The efficacy of the sacraments to this end resides not in the faith or virtue of the minister but in the faithfulness of God, who, having given the signs, is now pleased to use them. Knowing this, Christ and the apostles not only speak of the sign as if it were the thing signified but speak too as if receiving the former is the same as receiving the latter (e.g., Matt. 26:26-28; 1 Cor. 10:15-21; 1 Pet. 3:21-22). As the preaching of the Word makes the gospel audible, so the sacraments make it visible, and God stirs up faith by both means.

“Sacraments strengthen faith by correlating Christian beliefs with the testimony of our senses. The Heidelberg Catechism illustrates this in its answer to Question 75. The key words are as sure as.

Christ has commanded me . . . to eat of this broken bread and to drink of this cup in memory of him, and therewith has given assurance: first, that his body was . . . broken on the cross for me, and his blood shed for me, as sure as I see with my eyes the bread . . . broken for me and the cup communicated to me; and, further, that with his crucified body and shed blood he himself feeds and nourishes my soul to eternal life, as sure as I take and taste the bread and cup . . . which are given me as sure tokens of the body and blood of Christ.

“Sacraments function as means of grace on the principle that, literally, seeing is (i.e., leads to) believing.
Chapter 27 - Of the Sacraments

January 13

(27.3 The effectiveness of sacraments)

27.3 The grace which is exhibited in or by the sacraments rightly used, is not conferred by any power in them; neither doth the efficacy of a sacrament depend upon the piety or intention of him that doth administer it: but upon the work of the Spirit, and the word of institution, which contains, together with a precept authorizing the use thereof, a promise of benefit to worthy receivers.

Commentary

Ward says: "Two false views of Rome are here rejected. (1) The sacraments do not have an inherent power so that they more or less work automatically (ex opere operato) as, in effect, is the Roman teaching which says that, so long as the receiver puts no obstacle in the way, grace is actually conferred. (2) Rome taught that the priest must intend to do what the church teaches for the sacrament to be valid (Council of Trent, VII,11). This doctrine of intention leads to uncertainty in any particular case as to whether the sacrament has been validly administered, since no one can see the intention of another.

"The section teaches that the grace received by the sacraments is received in the way of faith in the objective promise of God and dependence on the work of the Spirit, rather than depending on the shifting states of human consciousness or on some inherent power. Faith is not to be equated with the right disposition or proper motive of the Roman teaching since 'the disposition that puts no obstacle in the way' is really a co-operation with grace and a contribution to salvation, whereas the Biblical way of faith is an assertion of dependence on the one in whom we believe. It is to be noted that the section also points out that the character of the administrator does not affect the validity of the sacrament. A Christian minister may be a hypocrite or later reject the faith, but the validity does not depend on his character but on the sure promise of God and the work of the Spirit."

Hodge says: "our Confession in this section proceeds to guard this important truth from abuse, by carefully showing upon what this grace-conveying efficacy of the sacraments does not, and upon what it does depend.

"1. This grace is not contained in the sacraments themselves, nor is it "conferred by any power in them." According to the Romish and Ritualistic view, the grace signified is contained in the sacrament itself, as qualities inhere in substances, and it is together with the outward sign presented in a real, objective sense, to every recipient, whether believer or unbeliever. They hold also that the sacrament confers this grace upon every recipient who does not positively resist, as an opus operatum the sole force of the sacramental action, as hot iron burns. This whole view is explicitly rejected as false by our Confession; and the whole efficacy of the sacrament is said to depend, not upon any part of it separately, nor upon the whole together, but upon the sovereign power of the Holy Ghost, who is always present, and uses the sacrament as his instrument and medium.

"2. The efficacy of the sacraments does not depend upon either the personal piety or the "intention" of the person who administers them. The Romanists admit that the efficacy of the sacraments does not depend upon the personal piety of the administrator; but they insist that it depends -- (1.) Upon the fact that the administrator is canonically authorized; (2.) Upon the fact that the administrator exercises at the moment of administration the secret "intention" of doing thereby what the Church intends in the definition of the sacrament. The priest may outwardly pronounce every word and perform every action prescribed in the ritual, and the recipient may fulfill every condition required of him, and yet if the priest fails in the secret intention of conferring the grace through the sacrament then and there, the recipient goes away destitute of the grace he supposes himself to have received, and which the priest has ostensibly professed to confer.

"3. But the efficacy of the sacraments depends -- (1.) Upon their divine appointment as means and channels of grace. They were not devised by man as suitable in themselves to produce a moral impression. But they were appointed by God, and we are commanded to use them as means of grace; and hence God virtually promises to meet every soul who uses them rightly in the sacrament. Christ seals his gracious covenant by them, and hence in their use invests with the grace of that covenant every soul to which it belongs. (2.) The efficacy of the sacrament resides in the sovereign and ever-present personal agency of the Holy Ghost, who uses the sacraments as his instruments and media of operation. The Spirit is the executive of God. He takes of the things of Christ and shows them unto us. Through him even the humanity of Jesus is virtually omnipresent, and all the benefits secured by his sacrifice are revealed and applied."
Chapter 27 - Of the Sacraments

(27.4 The new covenant sacraments identified)

27.4 There be only two sacraments ordained by Christ our Lord in the gospel; that is to say, Baptism, and the Supper of the Lord: neither of which may be dispensed by any, but by a minister of the Word lawfully ordained.

Commentary

Ward says: “The Church of Rome has taught for about 1,000 years that there are seven sacraments (baptism, confirmation, the eucharist, penance, holy orders, marriage, holy unction). She makes much of the symbolism of seven and links each sacrament to the stages of life reflecting the thought that ‘the totality of man’s life from birth to death is flooded with sacramental, supernatural light...Roman Catholic theology fixes the number of sacraments on the basis of its view that they constitute a series of supernatural acts that infuse supernatural grace into all of life from beginning to end, rather than upon an indubitable foundation of biblical exegesis’ (G.C. Berkouwer, The Sacraments (Grand Rapids 1969), 30,36). The controversy over the number of sacraments is at root a controversy over the nature of grace.

“Rome, because of the way she ties grace to the sacraments, gives lay persons the right to administer baptism to those who are ill and at risk of death. The principle of the Confession that only a minister should administer the sacraments follows from the fact that sacraments are seals of the word and are not to be administered without the word, and that the ministry is a gift of Christ and a stewardship in which a man must be faithful. Others not called to it should not intrude into it. The intent of this statement is not to suggest that the effectiveness of the sacrament depends on the character of the administrator, a view specifically rejected in WCF 27:3, but to ensure proper order and to check superstitious views as to the absolute necessity of the sacraments as taught by Rome. Probably most Presbyterian denominations have given to persons not ordained in the full sense a limited right to preach and to administer the sacraments in the capacity of Home Missionaries, lest persons in remote areas, with only rare visits from ordained ministers, be utterly deprived of the sacraments.”

Hodge says: “As we have seen, the word “sacrament” was used very indefinitely in the early Church to include any religious rite which had a latent spiritual meaning. A pre-eminence was always awarded to Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, as forming a class by themselves; but the number of ordinances to which the term “sacrament” was applied varied at different times and in different places from two to twelve. At last the number seven was suggested during the twelfth century, and determined authoritatively by the Council of Florence, 1439, and by the Council of Trent, 1562. These are Baptism, Confirmation, the Lord’s Supper, Penance, Extreme Unction, Orders, Marriage. In order to prove that “there be only two sacraments ordained by Christ our Lord in the gospel -- that is to say, Baptism and the Supper of the Lord” -- we have only to show that the other five so-called sacraments claimed by the Romanists do not belong to the same class of ordinances with Baptism and the Lord’s Supper; and we do this by applying the definition of a sacrament above given. Thus -- Penance, Confirmation, and Extreme Unction are not divine institutions in any sense.

Marriage was instituted, not by Christ, but by God; and Orders were instituted by Christ: but neither of these ordinances (a.) consists of an outward, visible sign, signifying an inward, spiritual grace; nor (b.) does either of them "represent, seal, or confer Christ and the benefits of the new covenant."

Our Confession also adds that no one has a right to administer the sacraments save a lawfully ordained minister. This is not said in the interest of any priestly theory of the ministry, as if there were any grace or grace-conferring virtue transmitted by ordination in succession from the apostles to the person ordained. But since the Church is an organized society, under laws executed by regularly appointed officers, it is evident that ordinances -- which are badges of Church membership, the gates of the fold, the instruments of discipline, and seals of the covenant formed by the great Head of the Church with his living members -- can properly be administered only by the highest legal officers of the Church, those who are commissioners as ambassadors for Christ to treat in his name with men. 1 Cor. iv. 1; 2 Cor. v. 20.
Chapter 27 - Of the Sacraments

(27.5 The relationship between the old and new covenant sacraments)

27.5 The sacraments of the Old Testament, in regard of the spiritual things thereby signified and exhibited, were, for substance, the same with those of the New.

Commentary

Ward says: “In 27:2 we saw that the relationship between the sign and the thing signified is such that the sacrament can be spoken of as the grace it signifies and vice versa. The text cited (1 Cor 10:2) speaks of the baptism of the Israelites whereas they were in fact circumcised, while in Colossians 2:11-12, Paul speaks of the Christians being baptised by the circumcision of Christ, ie. Christ’s death is the basis of true circumcision and equivalent to union with Christ of which baptism is the seal. In 1 Corinthians 5:7 Paul refers to the Passover when in fact it was the Lord’s Supper which the Corinthians observed (1 Cor 11). From such passages we can see that circumcision and the Passover were essentially the same in spiritual significance to baptism and the Lord’s Supper. We could infer the same from the broad principles of biblical teaching.”

Hodge elaborates: “We saw, under chapter vii., sections 5 and 6, that the old and the new dispensations were only two different modes in which the one changeless covenant of grace was administered and its blessings dispensed. The sacramental seals of the covenant must, therefore, be essentially the same then and now. The difference is -- (1.) That they were more prospective and typical then, and that they are more commemorative now. They signified a grace to be revealed then; they signify a grace already revealed now. (2.) They were, as to form, more gross and carnal then, and more spiritual now.

“Thus Baptism has taken the place of Circumcision as the rite of initiation. They both signify spiritual regeneration. Deut. x. 16; xxx. 6. Circumcision was Jewish baptism, and Baptism is Christian circumcision. Gal. iii. 27, 29; Col. ii. 10 -- 12.

“Thus the Lord’s Supper grew out of the Passover. He took the old bread and the old cup, and gave them a new consecration and a new meaning. Matt. xxvi. 26 -- 29. “Christ our passover is sacrificed for us.” 1 Cor. v. 7.”

Great Quotes on how the sacraments work

‘But in addition, to crown His infinite goodness, He has willed to add to the preaching of His Word certain actions which are designed to compel the most uneducated and stubborn in the world to believe more and more that God is not mocking them in offering them eternal life by this most wondrous means - the death of His own Son. Thus, by such signs and actions, all their senses are driven to consent to the doctrine of the Gospel, as if they were already fully enjoying the salvation which is promised to them...While we are here below, we possess the Heavenly Kingdom only by hope (Rom 8:24; 1 Cor 13:9); it is needful that we be supported to grow in this and persevere to the end (Eph 5:15).’

‘It is certainly true that we get no new thing in the Sacrament; we get no other thing in the Sacrament than we get in the Word. For what more could you ask than really to receive the Son of God himself?...The Sacrament is appointed that we may get a better hold of Christ than we got in the simple Word, that we may possess Christ in our hearts and minds more fully than we did before, by the simple Word...The Sacraments also serve to seal up and confirm the truth that is in the Word...Although you believed the evidence before, yet by the seals you believe it better...Therefore the whole concern of Christians should be, when they see the sacraments and hear the Word, to find and feel in their hearts and minds, that which they hear and see’ [Robert Bruce, The Mystery of the Lord’s Supper, 1590 translated by T.F.Torrance (James Clarke 1958), 63f]
Chapter 28 - Of Baptism

February 16

(28.1 What baptism is)

28.1 Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible church; but also, to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life. Which sacrament is, by Christ’s own appointment, to be continued in his church until the end of the world.

ANALYSIS WCF 28:1-7
1. Nature and meaning
2-3. Mode
4. Subjects
5. Necessity
6. Effectiveness
7. Frequency

Commentary

Ward says: “The nature of a sacrament has been discussed in the previous chapter. Baptism is the initiatory rite of the Christian church. In accordance with the root meaning of the word (a washing that involves a transformation), baptism speaks of a new relationship being cemented with the one in whose name you are baptised (1 Cor 10:1-2). If you are baptised in Paul’s name you belong to him (1 Cor 1:13), but being baptised in the name of the Triune God you belong to him. Hence, it is not surprising that the New Testament does not envisage a person as a Christian who has not been baptised. This new relationship with God is through incorporation into Christ by grace through faith. God’s covenant speaks of the manifold riches of God’s goodness to us and our baptism is a pledge and commitment also. The arguments over baptism must not lead us to the easy option of giving up its use altogether as in the Salvation Army and the Society of Friends (Quakers). Christ has instituted it; we must not despise it.”

Packer says: “Christian baptism, which has the form of a ceremonial washing (like John’s pre-Christian baptism), is a sign from God that signifies inward cleansing and remission of sins (Acts 22:16; 1 Cor. 6:11; Eph. 5:25-27), Spirit-wrought regeneration and new life (Titus 3:5), and the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit as God’s seal testifying and guaranteeing that one will be kept safe in Christ forever (1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 1:13-14). Baptism carries these meanings because first and fundamentally it signifies union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-7; Col. 2:11-12); and this union with Christ is the source of every element in our salvation (1 John 5:11-12). Receiving the sign in faith assures the persons baptized that God’s gift of new life in Christ is freely given to them. At the same time, it commits them to live henceforth in a new way as committed disciples of Jesus. Baptism signifies a watershed point in a human life because it signifies a new-creational ingrafting into Christ’s risen life.

“Christ instructed his disciples to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19). This means that the covenant relation which baptism formally confers is one of acceptance by, communion with, and commitment to all three Persons of the Godhead. When Paul says that the Israelites were “baptized into Moses” (1 Cor. 10:2), he means that they were put under Moses’ control and direction. Thus, baptism into the name of the triune God signifies control and direction by God himself.

“The outward sign does not automatically or magically convey the inward blessings that it signifies, and the candidates’ professions of faith are not always genuine. Peter had to tell the newly baptized Simon Magus that he was still unrenewed in heart (Acts 8:13-24).

“As a sign of a once-for-all event, baptism should be administered to a person only once. Baptism is real and valid if water and the triune name are used, even if it is of an adult whose profession turns out to have been hypocritical. Simon Magus received baptism once, and if he came to real faith later it would have been incorrect to baptize him again.”

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Chapter 28 - Of Baptism

(28.2 How baptism is administered)

28.2 The outward element to be used in this sacrament is water, wherewith the party is to be baptized, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, by a minister of the gospel, lawfully called thereunto.

Commentary

Ward says: "Water is a natural cleansing agent but the new relationship of which baptism speaks has been made effective through the Holy Spirit. He makes us part of Christ’s body (1 Cor 12:13). Scripture very directly connects the water of baptism and the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost (Matt 3:1) as if the one is emblematic of the other.

“A valid baptism requires the use of water and the name of the Triune God, for the one baptised now belongs to God. No contradiction should be supposed between references in Scripture to being baptised in the name of Christ or the Lord Jesus (eg Acts 19:5) and the words of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19. There is no relevant textual uncertainty in Matt 28:19, and the tenor of New Testament teaching is pure trinitarianism, far more than the citing of a few explicit texts might suggest. An obvious way of harmonising the Scripture references is to suppose that the candidate was baptised in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit following his confession of Jesus as Saviour and Lord, just as is common today. In any event, Matthew 28:19 does not prescribe a formula so much as succinctly sum up the fact that through redemption by Christ the character of God has been declared definitively and he is to be recognised accordingly. Hence the initiatory rite occurs in just such a trinitarian context as Acts and the Epistles reflect.”

Hodge says: “As to the action which constitutes it, Baptism is a washing with water (the manner of washing being indifferent) in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, by a lawfully ordained minister. The reason that Baptism should be administered only by a lawfully ordained minister has been considered under the last chapter.

“The Confession teaches that the command to baptize is a command to wash with water in the name of the Trinity. It is often, but erroneously, supposed that the controversy between our baptist brethren and the rest of the Christian Church with respect to Baptism is a question of mode; they affirming that the only right mode is to immerse -- we affirming that the best mode is to sprinkle. This is a great mistake. The real Baptist position -- as stated by Dr. Alexander Carson (p. 55) -- is, that the command to baptize is a simple and single command to immerse, in order to symbolize the death, burial, and resurrection of the believer with Christ. The true position maintained by other Christians is, that Baptism is a simple and single command to wash with water, in order to symbolize the purification wrought by the Holy Ghost. Hence the mode of washing has nothing to do with it. It is necessarily perfectly indifferent, so that it be decent. According to our view, the essential matter is the water, and the application of the water in the name of the Trinity. According to their view, the essential matter is the burial, total immersion, in water ..., as the case may be.”

Shaw says: “This section embraces the following points:— 1. That the outward element to be used in the sacrament of baptism is water. This outward sign represents the blood and Spirit of Christ.— Rev. i. 5; Tit. iii. 6. As water has a cleansing virtue for removing defilements from the body, so the blood of Christ removes the guilt of sin and cleanses the defiled conscience, and the Spirit of Christ purifies the soul from the pollution of sin. 2. That baptism is to be administered in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. To be baptised in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, signifies that we are baptised by the authority of the persons of the Holy Trinity; that we are baptised into the faith and profession of the blessed Trinity; and that we are solemnly devoted to the service of these divine persons. 3. That baptism is to be dispensed lay a lawfully ordained minister of the gospel. They only have authority to administer baptism who have received a commission from Christ to preach the gospel.— Matt. xxviii. 19. We have no account of any one dispensing the ordinance in the primitive Church, but such as were called, either ordinarily or extraordinarily, to the work of the ministry. It is the unfounded opinion that baptism is absolutely necessary to salvation, that has led the Church of Rome to permit this rite to be performed by laymen and women in cases of urgent necessity.
Chapter 28 - Of Baptism

(28.3 The mode of baptism)

28.3 Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but Baptism is rightly administered by pouring, or sprinkling water upon the person.

Commentary

Packer says: "No prescription of a particular mode of baptism can be found in the New Testament. The command to baptize may be fulfilled by immersion, dipping, or sprinkling; all three modes satisfy the meaning of the Greek verb baptizo and the symbolic requirement of passing under, and emerging from, cleansing water."

The reason the presbyterian and reformed tradition has baptized by affusion (pouring or sprinkling) is because the only example of the mode of baptism given in the NT is the baptism of the Holy Spirit in Acts 1 and 2.

Ward says: "Two years earlier [before they had produced the Confession] the Westminster Assembly specified in their Directory for Public Worship (1644) that the minister 'is to baptize the child with water, which for the manner of doing is not only lawful but expedient to be by pouring or sprinkling water on the face of the child, without any other ceremony.' In debate the previous day (August 7, 1644) the proposal to include dipping as well as pouring and sprinkling was excluded 25 votes to 24. It should be noted that the debate was not between dipping and the other modes, as is sometimes stated, but on the propriety of putting dipping on the same level as the other modes. The next day the question was dealt with afresh and the statement above agreed to. 'But as for the dispute itself about dipping, it was thought fit and most safe to let it alone' [John Lightfoot, Journal of the Westminster Assembly in Works, (1834 edition) Vol.13, 301]. The statement of the Westminster Confession in this section reflects a similar line. Pouring or sprinkling are lawful and expedient. Immersion is not necessary although of itself it does not make the sacrament invalid.

"The water is a symbol of a change beyond the power of the water, and so the quantity is not of much importance. Still, the positive teaching of Scripture is that baptism involves putting water on the person not putting the person into water, and the parallel with Holy Spirit baptism (Matt 3:11 cf. Acts 2) confirms this. A simple mode suitable to all kinds of people and situations is implied by the New Testament descriptions. Total immersion lacks Old Testament precedent or clear New Testament justification.

'The root idea of the Greek word baptizo is not total immersion, but an intensive dipping which involves a transformation (cf. dyeing). Metaphorical uses became common in Greek literature in which mode has no place: being overwhelmed with cares; drunk with wine etc. However, because of the richness of the covenant of grace of which baptism is a sign and seal, baptismal language can be used for many aspects of Christian experience, and some misapply Romans 6:1ff in this connection. In that passage Paul is speaking of the implications of union with Christ (which is implied in Christian baptism) without at all reflecting on the mode of baptism. It is the meaning of baptism which Paul has in mind. Further, the idea that the mode of baptism is essentially a portrayal of our death to self and rising with Christ (as immersionists argue) is impossible. Paul would have to say 'out of which you were also raised with him' if he was thinking of baptismal water. Our baptism is not the grave in which we die spiritually. Who dies in a grave? Baptism speaks of union with Christ in whose name we are baptised, and thus of union with him in his death (by crucifixion), his burial (in a cave in the side of a hill), which certified the reality of his death (and shows that subsequent life must be of a new order), and his resurrection."
Chapter 28 - Of Baptism

January 19

(28.4 The recipients of baptism)

28.4 Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one, or both, believing parents, are to be baptized.

Commentary

A one sentence biblical argument for infant (or covenant) baptism: Because God made a promise to believers and their children (Acts 2:39), and has appointed that the sign of that promise is baptism (Acts 2:38; 1:4; 2:33; Romans 4:13; 9:8-9; Galatians 3:14), therefore the sign of the promise should be given to those to whom the promise was given.

Packer says: “To baptize believers’ babies, in the belief that this accords with God’s revealed will, has been the historic practice of most churches. However, the worldwide baptist community, which includes distinguished Reformed thinkers, disputes it.

“This links up with the baptist insistence that membership of local congregations is only for those who have publicly professed personal faith: an emphasis often buttressed by the claim that Christ instituted baptism primarily for a public profession of faith, and that such a profession is part of the definition of baptism, so that infant baptism is not really baptism at all. (Therefore baptist churches usually rebaptize as believers persons baptized in infancy who have come to faith; from the baptist standpoint they are still unbaptized.) Reformed theology negates the view that believer-baptism is the only baptism and rejects baptist denials of a place for believers’ children in the body of Christ by virtue of their parentage, and thus from birth. These differences about the visible church form the background for all discussions of infant baptism as such.

“The case for baptizing believers’ infants… rests on the claim that the transition from the “old” to the “new” form of God’s covenant that was brought about by the coming of Christ did not affect the principle of family solidarity in the covenant community (i.e., the church, as it is now called). Infants were therefore to be baptized, as Jewish male infants had previously been circumcised, not to confer on them covenant status, but to attest the covenant status that by God’s sovereign appointment their parentage had already given them.

“In 1 Corinthians 7:14, Paul resolves the question of whether God accepts a marriage in which only one partner has become a Christian by invoking the certainty that the children of such a marriage are relationally and covenantally “holy,” that is, are dedicated to and accepted by God in company with their one Christian parent. So the principle of parent-and-child solidarity still stands, as Peter also indicated in his Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:39). But if infants share covenant status with their parent, it is fitting, other things being equal, to give them the sign of that status and of their place in the covenant community, and it would be unfitting for the church to withhold it. This fitness is demonstrated by the fact that when circumcision was the sign of covenant status and community inclusion, God commanded it explicitly (Gen. 17:9-14).

“Against this, baptists affirm that (a) circumcision was primarily a sign of Jewish ethnic identity, so the parallel alleged between it and Christian baptism is a mistake; (b) under the new covenant, the requirement of personal faith before baptism is absolute; and (c) practices that Scripture does not explicitly recognize and approve must not be brought into church life.

“Certainly, all adult church members should have professed faith personally before the church, and communities that baptize infants provide for this in a rite of confirmation or its equivalent. The Christian nurture of baptist and paedobaptist children will be similar: dedicated to God in infancy, either by baptism or by a dedication rite (which some will see as a dry baptism), they will then be brought up to live for the Lord and led to the point of publicly professing faith on their own account in confirmation or baptism (which some will see as a wet confirmation). After this they will enjoy full communicant status, unless indeed they come under discipline for some lapse. The ongoing debate is not about nurture but about God’s way of defining the church.
Chapter 28 - Of Baptism

(28.5 The necessity of baptism)

28.5 Although it be a great sin to contempt or neglect this ordinance, yet grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto it, as that no person can be regenerated, or saved, without it; or, that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated.

Commentary

Ward says: “Rome teaches the necessity of baptism as a means of regenerating grace. The Reformed teach the necessity of baptism as God’s direction to us: it is God’s command, but does not accomplish salvation of itself. Christ appointed it; disobedience is sin.”

Shaw says: “This section affirms—

1. That baptism is not of such absolute necessity to salvation, that none can be saved without it. God has not made baptism and faith equally necessary.—Mark xvi. 16. The penitent thief was saved without being baptised. But baptism is an instituted means of salvation, and the contempt of it must be a great sin on the part of the parents, though the neglect cannot be ascribed to the child before he arrives at maturity, and cannot, therefore, involve him in the guilt.

2. That baptism is not regeneration, nor are all who are baptised undoubtedly regenerated. That the baptism of water is regeneration, and that every person duly baptised is born again, is the doctrine of the Church of Rome; and this doctrine has been embraced by many in Protestant Churches, and receives too much countenance from the Liturgy of the Church of England.

It is a very dangerous doctrine; and that it has no warrant from Scripture appears from the case of Simon Magus, who after baptism remained “in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity.”—Acts viii. 13, 23. Paul, writing to the Corinthians, says: “I thank God that I baptised none of you, but Crispus and Gaius.” But if baptism be regeneration, his meaning must be: “I thank God that I regenerated none of you.” And could Paul really give thanks to God on this account? How absurd the idea! “Christ,” says he, “sent me not to baptise.” But can it be thought that Christ did not send the chief of the apostles to promote the great work of regeneration? Unquestionably Paul made a great difference between baptism and regeneration.”

Hodge says that this section teaches: “1. That grace and salvation are not so inseparably united to Baptism that only the baptized are saved, or that all the baptized are saved. 2. That, nevertheless, it is a great sin to contempt or neglect this ordinance; for its observance is commanded and, in the right use of it, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost to such (whether of age or infants) as the grace belongeth unto.”

In our own time, those who have advocated the so-called “Federal Vision” theology have blurred the lines of the Confession’s teaching on this subject, stretched the limits of its allowances and, in fact, transgressed its bounds. To be unclear on this issue undermines the Gospel. The promise always precedes the sign in the Bible and the sign never brings about the promise in the Bible. This is to confused God’s sovereign initiative and election in salvation, with his means of securing it and assuring us of it.
Chapter 28 - Of Baptism

(28.6 The effectiveness of the sacraments)

28.6 The efficacy of Baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; yet, notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited, and conferred, by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God's own will, in his appointed time.

Commentary

Ward says: "Baptism as the token of God's covenant may not have its spiritual reality fulfilled at the time of administration, but sooner or later as God wills, it will accomplish its object in those God intends for salvation. It will testify and confirm that union that the believer has with Christ. Those who scruple the circumstances of their baptism if it was associated with a mere nominal church connection, should be encouraged by this."

Shaw says: "The efficacy of baptism is not confined to the moment of administration; but though not effectual at the time it is administered, it may afterwards be effectual, through the working of the Spirit.—John iii. 5, 8."

"We ought to improve our baptism, especially when we are present at the administration of it to others, "by serious and thankful consideration of the nature of it, and of the ends for which Christ instituted it, the privileges and benefits conferred and sealed thereby, and our solemn vow made therein; by being humbled for our sinful defilement, our falling short of, and walking contrary to, the grace of baptism, and our engagements; by growing up to assurance of pardon of sin, and of all other blessings sealed to us in that sacrament; by drawing strength from the death and resurrection of Christ, into whom we are baptised, for the mortifying of sin and quickening of grace; and by endeavouring to live by faith, to have our conversation in holiness and righteousness, as those that have therein given up their names to Christ, and to walk in brotherly love, as being baptised by the same Spirit into one body."

Hodge says: "The ground taken here is intermediate between two opposite extremes —

(1.) The extreme held by Papists and Ritualists of baptismal regeneration.

(a.) This is not taught in Scripture. The language relied upon to prove it (John iii. 5; Acts ii. 38) is easily explained on the principle that, in virtue of the sacramental union between the sign and the grace signified, what is true of the one is metaphorically predicated of the other. There is nothing said of the efficacy of Baptism which is not likewise said of the efficacy of the truth. James i. 18; John xvii. 19; Pet. i. 28. But the mere hearing of the truth saves no one.

(b.) Baptism cannot be the only or ordinary means of regeneration, because faith and repentance are the fruits of regeneration, but the prerequisites of Baptism. Acts ii. 38; viii. 37; x. 47.

(c.) Universal experience in Romanist and Ritualistic communities proves that the baptized are not generally regenerated. Our Saviour says, "By their fruits ye shall know them." Matt. vii. 20.

(2.) Our Standards oppose the other extreme, that Baptism is a mere sign of grace and badge of Christian profession.
Chapter 28 - Of Baptism

(28.7 The frequency of baptism)

28.7 The sacrament of Baptism is but once to be administered unto any person.

It is very common in evangelical circles in North America to encounter some professing Christians who have been baptized multiple times. Very often, because it is not uncommon for youth in certain evangelical contexts to make multiple professions of faith (or "recommitments") they will be "re-baptized" on some or all of those occasions. Some Christians will ask to be baptized again, even if they were baptized as believers, if they think that they have subsequently come to faith in Christ. One even encounters "tourist baptism" in our day (where, for instance, Christians visiting Israel want to be "baptized" again in the Jordan river.

This section is explaining that due to the very nature of baptism, its meaning and significance, it is to be done only once. This section also impinges on an important debate on the validity of Roman Catholic baptism between 19th century American Presbyterian theologians Charles Hodge and James Henley Thornwell.

Commentary

Hodge says: "That Baptism is never to be administered more than once to any person appears

(1.) From the symbolical significance of the rite. It signifies spiritual regeneration -- the inauguration of the divine life. Of course it can have but one commencement.

(2.) It is the rite of initiation into the Christian Church, and as there is no provision made for getting out of the Church when once in, so there is no provision made for coming in more than once.

(3.) The apostles baptized each individual but once.

Shaw says: "Baptism is not to be administered to any person oftener than once. This is plain from the nature of the ordinance. It is a solemn admission of the person baptised as a member of the visible Church; and though those that "walk disorderly" are to be cast out, yet there is no hint in Scripture that, when readmitted, they are to be baptised again. The thing signified by baptism cannot be repeated, and the engagements come under can never be annulled."

Ward says: "The statement of the Confession follows from the nature of the sacrament as an initiatory rite (see WCF 28:1). It is not without significance that the Reformers and the Westminster men held to the validity of Roman Catholic baptism, but not to the lawfulness of receiving baptism from a Roman priest (as illustrated by the quote below)."

"In this belief we declare that, properly speaking, there can be no church where the word of God is not received, nor profession made of subjection to it, nor use of the sacraments. Therefore we condemn the papal assemblies ...Nevertheless, as some trace of the church is left in the papacy, and the virtue and substance of baptism remain, and as the efficacy of baptism does not depend upon the person who administers it, we confess that those baptised in it do not need a second baptism. But on account of its corruptions, we cannot present children to be baptised in it without incurring pollution." [French Confession (1559) 28]
Chapter 29 - Of the Lord's Supper

(29.1 Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper for our remembrance, assurance, and edification)

29.1 Our Lord Jesus, in the night wherein he was betrayed, instituted the sacrament of his body and blood, called the Lord's Supper, to be observed in his church, unto the end of the world, for the perpetual remembrance of the sacrifice of himself in his death; the sealing all benefits thereof unto true believers, their spiritual nourishment and growth in him, their further engagement in and to all duties which they owe unto him; and, to be a bond and pledge of their communion with him, and with each other, as members of his mystical body.

ANALYSIS WCF 29:1-8
1. Institution
2. Nature
3. Right administration
4. Certain abuses rejected
5. Relation of signs to things signified
6. Transubstantiation rejected
7. Christ's real presence explained
8. Unworthy recipients

Commentary

The Lord's Supper is inseparably linked with Jesus' institution and directions. It belongs to the church and so is to be observed congregationally, not privately (section 4), and is to be supervised by the church (section 8). Note the six purposes: (1) remembrance of his atonement; (2) confirming of all Christ's benefits to believers; (3) nourishment and maturing of believers; (4) the engagement of believers in their glad service of their Lord; (5) a pledge of believers' communion with Christ; and (6) an expression of believers' communion with one another as a part of Christ's body, the church.

A. A. Hodge

As to the design of the Lord's Supper, the teaching of our Standards may be exhibited under the following heads: --

(1.) The Lord's Supper is a commemoration of the death of Christ. This is evident -- (a.) From the fact that the bread is an emblem of his body broken, and the wine of his blood shed upon the cross for us. Matt. xxvi. 26 -- 28; Luke xxii. 19, 20. (b.) From the fact that the act of eating the bread and of drinking the wine is declared, both by Christ and by Paul, to be done "in remembrance" of Christ, and to "shew his death till he come." Luke xxii. 19; 1 Cor. xi. 26.

(2.) It is a seal of the gospel covenant wherein all the benefits of the new covenant are signified, sealed, and applied to believers. Conf. Faith, ch. xxix., section 1; L. Cat., q. 162; S. Cat. q. 92. Christ says, "This cup is the new testament (covenant) in my blood, which is shed for you" (Luke xxii. 20); i.e., My blood is the seal of the covenant of grace, and this cup is the symbol of my blood, and as such is offered to you. In its use Christ ratifies his promise to save us on the condition of faith, and to endow us with all the benefits of his redemption. We, in taking this pledge, solemnly bind ourselves to entire self-consecration and to all that is involved in the requirements of the gospel of Christ, not as we understand them, but as he intends them. It is a universal principle that all oaths bind in the sense in which they are understood by the persons who impose them.

(3.) Hence it is a badge of Christian profession -- a mark of allegiance of a citizen of the kingdom of heaven.

(4.) It was designed to signify and effect our communion with Christ, in his person, in his offices, and in their precious fruits. Paul says (1 Cor. x. 16), "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion (koinonia) of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ?" L. Cat., q. 170: "So they that worthily communicate in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, do therein feed upon the body and blood of Christ, not after a corporal and carnal, but in a spiritual manner; yet truly and really, while by faith they receive and apply unto themselves Christ crucified, and all the benefits of his Death." The bread represents his flesh, and the wine represents his blood. We receive the symbol with the mouth corporeally; we receive the flesh and blood symbolized by faith, yet really. "Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life.....For my flesh is meat indeed, and nay blood is drink indeed." John vi. 54, 55.

(5.) It was designed to show forth and to effect the mutual communion of believers with each other, as members of one body and of one blood. 1 Cor. x. 17: "For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread." Union with the common Head necessarily implies communion with each other in that Head.
Chapter 29 - Of the Lord’s Supper

(29.2 The Lord’s Supper is not a sacrifice or re-sacrifice of Christ)

29.2 In this sacrament, Christ is not offered up to his Father; nor any real sacrifice made at all, for remission of sins of the quick or dead; but only a commemoration of that one offering up of himself, by himself, upon the cross, once for all: and a spiritual oblation of all possible praise unto God, for the same: so that the popish sacrifice of the mass (as they call it) is most abominably injurious to Christ’s one, only sacrifice, the alone propitiation for all the sins of his elect.

Commentary

There is a marked tendency of well-meaning evangelicals in our age to experiment with their administration and explanation of the Lord’s Supper in their congregations, without perhaps adequately understanding the ramifications of their creativity. Those in the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition should be well-versed in the discussions and debates surrounding the theology and administration of the Lord’s Supper from the Reformation era on.

Ward observes: This sacrament is not a true, though bloodless, sacrifice as has been held by many and still is. Rather, it is a commemoration which proclaims the death of the Lord, that which is of supreme praise, until he comes again. In Roman Catholic teaching the mass is regarded as a bloodless re-enactment of Christ’s sacrifice, and thus ‘it obscures the finished and completed character of Christ’s work and robs him of his glory by daring to see it as repeated’ (S.E.Waldron). It might be added here that the tendency even in Protestant circles to speak of the Lord’s Table as an ‘altar’ is improper. An altar is a place of sacrifice; a table is a place of fellowship with the one who has reconciled us to God by his death and now lives and is present with us.

A. A. Hodge

*Their doctrine as to the mass as a sacrifice.* The Council of Trent teaches (sess. xxii., cans. 1 -- 3) that the Eucharist is both a sacrament and a sacrifice. As a sacrament, the soul of the recipient is nourished by the real body, blood, soul and divinity of Christ, which he eats in the form of a wafer. As a sacrifice, it is “an external oblation of the body and blood of Christ offered to God, in recognition of his supreme lordship, under the appearance of bread and wine visibly exhibited by a legitimate minister, with the addition of certain prayers and ceremonies prescribed by the Church, for the greater worship of God and edification of the people.” This is not a mere act in commemoration of the one sacrifice upon the cross, but a constantly repeated real, although bloodless, expiatory sacrifice, atoning for sin and propitiating God. (Counc. Trent, sess. xxii., can. 3.)

This doctrine is false, because -- (a.) It is nowhere taught in Scripture. (b.) The Christian ministry are never called or spoken of as priests, but as "teachers" and "rulers." (c.) The one sacrifice of Christ on the cross was perfect, and excludes all others. Heb. ix. 25 -- 28; x. 10 -- 27. (d.) The same ordinance cannot be both a sacrament and a sacrifice. Christ says that by eating and drinking we are to “shew forth his death,” and to do this in remembrance of him.” The same act cannot be a commemoration of one sacrifice, and itself an actual sacrifice having intrinsic sin-expiating efficacy.

J. I. Packer

On the second question, all the Reformers insisted that at the table we give thanks to Christ for his finished and accepted work of atonement, rather than repeat, renew, reoffer, re-present, or reactivate it, as the Roman Catholic doctrine of the mass affirms.
Chapter 29 - Of the Lord's Supper

(29.3 The Lord's Supper is to be administered by pastors in a congregational context)

29.3 The Lord Jesus hath, in this ordinance, appointed his ministers to declare his word of institution to the people; to pray, and bless the elements of bread and wine, and thereby to set them apart from a common to an holy use; and to take and break the bread, to take the cup, and (they communicating also themselves) to give both to the communicants; but to none who are not then present in the congregation.

Commentary

The administration of the sacrament is always to be accompanied by the words of institution, which give it its meaning, and prayer for the presence in blessing of the Lord as the sacrament is dispensed. The breaking of the bread is regarded as a significant action in the Confession. A very general view in the Reformed church has associated this action with the manner of Christ's death but it was a custom at every meal. The Supper must not become a passion play, but must point us to the result of Christ's self-offering in the spiritual banquet which nourishes our souls for eternal life. The table at which the disciples reclined with our Lord is an outward aspect of communion which ought not to be disregarded when considering its spiritual nature. It was in fact the common practice of Reformed and Presbyterian churches to provide such.

A. A. Hodge

(5.) In opposition to the manifold abuses of this ordinance which prevail among the Romanists, our Standards, in common with the general judgment of the Reformed Churches, teach that the Lord's Supper is essentially a communion, in which the fellowship of the believer with Christ and with his fellow-believers is set forth by their eating and drinking of the same bread and the same cup. It follows that it should not be sent to persons not present at the administration, nor administered by the officiating priest to himself alone. In particular cases, however, it may be administered in private houses, for the benefit of Christians long confined by sickness, provided that the officers and a sufficient number of the members of the Church be present to preserve the true character of the ordinance as a communion.

Robt. Shaw

The administration of the sacrament is always to be accompanied by the words of institution, which give it its meaning, and prayer for the presence in blessing of the Lord as the sacrament is dispensed. The breaking of the bread is regarded as a significant action in the Confession. A very general view in the Reformed church has associated this action with the manner of Christ's death but it was a custom at every meal. The Supper must not become a passion play, but must point us to the result of Christ's self-offering in the spiritual banquet which nourishes our souls for eternal life. The table at which the disciples reclined with our Lord is an outward aspect of communion which ought not to be disregarded when considering its spiritual nature. It was in fact the common practice of Reformed and Presbyterian churches to provide such.

N.B. A.A. Hodge helpfully notes that there are occasions on which it is appropriate to administer the Lord's Supper outside of the regular services of the church. When this is done it should be: (1) approved by the church elders; (2) administered by a minister of the Gospel; (3) attended by elders and other congregants and (4) observed in the context of a worship service (however brief). So, for instance, if it is in a Hospice, the minister, elders and a few members might gather in the room of the one to whom it is being brought. Then a brief service of reading, preaching, praying and singing the word would be held in the context of which the Lord's Supper would be administered. This protects the biblical and theological integrity of the rite.
Chapter 29 - Of the Lord's Supper

January 26

(29.4 There are practices that undermine the integrity of the Lord's Supper)

29.4 Private masses, or receiving this sacrament by a priest, or any other, alone; as likewise, the denial of the cup to the people, worshipping the elements, the lifting them up, or carrying them about, for adoration, and the reserving them for any pretended religious use; are all contrary to the nature of this sacrament, and to the institution of Christ.

Rowland Ward's Translation

29:4 Private masses, receiving this sacrament alone from a priest or anyone else, denial of the cup to the people, worshipping the bread and wine, lifting them up or carrying them about for adoration, and reserving them for any supposed religious use, are all contrary to the nature of this sacrament, and to the institution of Christ.

Commentary

Ward: Several Roman abuses are here expressly rejected. They arose from erroneous views of the sacraments. In the first case, the sacrament was held to have inherent virtue and was received privately; in the second case, the doctrine of transubstantiation (see section 6) was held to make giving the cup to the laity unsuitable, lest the blood of Christ be spilt. Hence, the Council of Constance in AD 1414 forbade giving the cup to the laity; in the third case, the doctrine of transubstantiation (which developed gradually and was formally promulgated in AD 1215) was associated with worship of the elements since, after consecration, they were held to be the actual body and blood of Christ under the appearance of bread and wine.

Van Dixhoorn adds: "The last line of the third paragraph specifies that the Lord's supper is not to be received privately. One reason why the Westminster assembly frowned on bringing the bread and wine to persons not present in the worship service, was presented in paragraph 1: this meal is intended to celebrate communion not with Christ only, but also with fellow Christians.

"A second related reason why the assembly disapproved of private communion is drawn from dysfunctional Corinthian church: not only did the individualistic approach of the Corinthian believers earn an apostolic rebuke (1 Cor. 11:20; cf. 17-22), it also seems to have been the settled pattern of the first Christians to 'gather together to break bread' rather than to eat in isolation (e.g., Acts 20:7).

"A third reason why the assembly worked to banish the still-popular practice of private communion is suggested in paragraph 2 and clarified in the opening line of paragraph 4: the Roman Catholic Church had long taught the saving efficacy of the Mass; priests offered private Masses as a kind of life-line to grace. The assembly considered the continuation of private communion a poor example, even in churches where the theology of the Lord's supper had been corrected. Like the Israelites who were to remember the rebels of the wilderness days, Protestants were to remember the Romanists of the theological wilderness and avoid their ways (1 Cor. 10:6).

"Having forbidden private communion, the assembly proceeded to tackle other ceremonial abuses too. The most egregious was the Roman Catholic practice of forbidding people to drink of the cup, lest they should accidentally spill the blood of Christ on the floor of the church. Suffice to say that when Jesus gave the cup, he gave it to all his disciples, both the coordinated and the clumsy (Mark 14:23; 1 Cor. 11:25-29). The practice of withholding the cup from the laity was a gradual, natural, and tragic development from the idea that the wine miraculously becomes blood when blessed by the priest—a theory which the assembly confronts in paragraphs 5 and 6.

Actually, any additional ceremonies attached to the supper and required either of those who administer or of those who receive the supper are an offence to God. Bowing down to the elements, lifting up the elements, parading the elements, adoring the elements, storing them for later religious purposes—all of these activities oppose the true nature of the sacrament and subvert the simple institution of Christ. It is vain worship—empty and useless. Yet all of these practices were commanded by the Roman Catholic Church, with penalties for nonconformity. Some of these practices were commanded by the Church of England, with penalties for nonconformity too. Both the Reformation and post-Reformation histories vividly illustrate the drift and the danger to leaders in the church who teach as doctrines the commandments of men" (Matt. 15:9).
Chapter 29 - Of the Lord's Supper

(29.5 Sometime the elements are spoken of as if they are what they represent)

29.5 The outward elements in this sacrament, duly set apart to the uses ordained by Christ, have such relation to him crucified, as that, truly, yet sacramentally only, they are sometimes called by the name of the things they represent, to wit, the body and blood of Christ; albeit, in substance and nature, they still remain truly and only bread and wine, as they were before.

Rowland Ward's Translation

29:5 When the outward elements in this sacrament are duly set apart to the uses appointed by Christ they are related to him as crucified in a true yet sacramental way. Therefore they are sometimes called by the name of the things they represent, that is, the body and blood of Christ. However, in substance and in nature they still remain truly and only bread and wine, as they were before their sacramental use.

Commentary

Ward: There is a relationship between the sign and the thing signified. When Jesus said, 'This is my body' he is not to be taken in a crassly literal sense, any more than when he says, 'I am the door.' He means that the elements of bread and wine represent his body and blood surrendered for our salvation. Bread and wine nourish physically; Christ’s death for us nourishes us spiritually.

Van Dixhoorn:

The fifth paragraph of this chapter offers a condensed reader’s guide to the sacramental sections of the Bible, one of a number of such guides to Bible readers found in the confession. It is designed to explain the vivid language used in Scripture to describe the Lord’s supper: ‘The outward elements in this sacrament’, the bread and the wine, when ‘duly set apart to the uses ordained by Christ’, have such a close ‘relation to him crucified’ that ‘they are sometimes called by the name of the things they represent’.

We see this kind of language, for example, in Matthew 26:26-28. There ‘Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant”’. The Westminster assembly’s observation here is that Jesus did not say that the bread was like his body. He did not say that the wine was like his blood. He effectively, and shockingly, told his disciples to eat his body and drink his blood. The Westminster assembly’s conclusion here is that what Jesus spoke, he spoke ‘truly’. That is to say, there is nothing inappropriate or problematic about this kind of talk. It is just as acceptable for us to use this language today as it was for Jesus to use that language himself. He substituted the reality for the symbol, instead of the symbol for the reality. And so can we.

Evidently Jesus spoke this way because his sacrament and his sacrifice are so closely related; because the symbol chosen by Christ is so perfectly suited to represent himself. Nonetheless Christ’s statement (made by a saviour of flesh and blood) was true in a sacramental sense only. That is to say, the bread is a true symbol of Christ’s flesh. In substance, in nature, the bread is bread and the wine is wine. The interchange between symbol and substance is amply illustrated in 1 Corinthians 11, where Paul moves back and forth between mentioning ‘the body and blood of the Lord’ (once, referring to the crucifixion and the supper), and eating the bread and drinking the cup (three times, referring to the supper). Since the apostle continues to speak of the bread and cup, this guides our understanding of his references to ‘the body and blood of the Lord’. His usage implies that even after these common elements are properly set apart for holy use, ‘they still remain truly and only bread and wine, as they were before’.

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Chapter 29 - Of the Lord's Supper

(29.6 The doctrine of transubstantiation is unbiblical and undermines the meaning of the Supper)

29.6 That doctrine which maintains a change of the substance of bread and wine, into the substance of Christ's body and blood (commonly called transubstantiation) by consecration of a priest, or by any other way, is repugnant, not to Scripture alone, but even to common sense, and reason; overthroweth the nature of the sacrament, and hath been, and is, the cause of manifold superstitions; yea, of gross idolatries.

Commentary

Ward: This section repudiates the doctrine of transubstantiation held by the Church of Rome. It is indicative of the central role of this teaching in Roman Catholic theology that the Confession specifically rejects it. It is contrary to the nature of a sacrament because it identifies the sign and the thing signified, it is thoroughly unscriptural, not merely beyond reason but contrary to it, and it is productive of many errors. Once consecrated, the elements are held by Rome to be truly Christ's body and blood offered again on the altar. As a crumb of bread could fall to the ground or wine be spilt, wafers were introduced in place of ordinary bread and the cup was held back from the people.

Van Dixhoorn: If the fifth paragraph's instructions on reading biblical language is correct, then the truth of the sixth paragraph carries real force. The Roman Catholic 'doctrine which maintains a change of the substance of bread and wine, into the substance of Christ's body and blood (commonly called transubstantiation) is simply incorrect. The doctrine of transubstantiation teaches that when the elements of bread and wine are consecrated, or ceremonially set apart by a priest, the real substance of the bread and wine changes into flesh and blood even though all the apparent characteristics of the bread and wine do not change. The bread still looks and feels and smells and tastes (and if you drop enough of it on the floor it still sounds) like bread. The wine still tingles on the tongue and smells like the South of France or Napa Valley. But Roman Catholics are taught that it is really Christ's flesh and blood.

Transubstantiation was the dominant theory, but by no means the only theory, employed to explain how the elements of the supper could become the body and blood of the Lord. Here the Westminster assembly is rejecting not just transubstantiation, but any theory that attempted to justify a doctrine of the real physical presence of Christ. Neither the 'consecration of a priest', nor any other special words or actions, are capable of changing the substance of the elements of the Lord's supper. The idea of transubstantiation or any similar theory really is 'repugnant, not to Scripture alone, but even to common sense, and reason'. Without doubt it is contrary to Scripture. After all, as the resurrected Jesus explained to his disciples, he has normal 'flesh and blood' (Luke 24:39). As Peter told the 'Men of Israel' in Solomon's portico, heaven has received Jesus and will keep him until all things are restored at the last day (Acts 3:21). We celebrate the supper 'in remembrance' of Jesus, but 'remembering' is certainly an odd thing to do if Jesus is actually present with us bodily, first on the table, and then in our mouths (1 Cor. 11:24-26). Angels once had to tell people standing around an empty tomb, 'He is not here, but has risen' (Luke 24:6). We sometimes need to tell people standing around the Lord's table, 'He is not here, but has ascended.'

Transubstantiation and the family of associated theories are also contrary to common sense. We should not require a simile in order to identify a metaphor. When Jesus stated that the bread or wine was his body or blood, we should not need for him to spell out that he means that the bread or wine 'is like' his body or blood. It is no exaggeration to say that the idea of a physical presence of our Lord in the Lord's supper theologically and linguistically 'overthrows the nature of the sacrament' but also, historically, has been the cause of many superstitions—yes even obscene idolatries.

J.I. Packer: At the time of the Reformation, questions about the nature of Christ's presence in the Supper and the relation of the rite to his atoning death were centers of stormy controversy. On the first question, the Roman Catholic church affirmed (as it still affirms) transubstantiation, defined by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. Transubstantiation means that the substance of the bread and wine are miraculously transformed into the substance of Christ's body and blood so that they are no longer bread and wine, though they appear to be. Luther modified this, affirming what was later called "consubstantiation" (a term that Luther did not favor), namely, that Christ's body and blood come to be present in, with, and under the form of the bread and wine, which thus become more than bread and wine though not less. The Eastern Orthodox churches and some Anglicans say much the same. Zwingli denied that the glorified Christ, now in heaven, is present in any way that the words bodily, physically, or locally would fit. Calvin held that though the bread and wine remained unchanged (he agreed with Zwingli that the is of "this is my body ... my blood" means "represents," not "constitutes"), Christ through the Spirit grants worshippers true enjoyment of his personal presence, drawing them into fellowship with himself in heaven (Heb. 12:22-24) in a way that is glorious and very real, though indescribable.
Chapter 29 - Of the Lord’s Supper

(29.7 Believers truly commune with Christ, who is spiritual present to them, by faith)

29.7 Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements, in this sacrament, do then also, inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally but spiritually, receive, and feed upon, Christ crucified, and all benefits of his death: the body and blood of Christ being then, not corporally or carnally, in, with, or under the bread and wine; yet, as really, but spiritually, present to the faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves are to their outward senses.

Commentary

It has become somewhat common in our own time for otherwise conservative, orthodox, Reformed pastors and theologians to speak of the Reformed view of the Lord’s view of the presence of Christ in the Supper as the “real presence” view. This is problematic because the Reformed have always disagreed with the four theological traditions that have claimed the language and theology of “real presence” (Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran and High Anglicanism). The Reformed view is better described as the “true communion” or “spiritual presence.” This terminology distinguishes the Reformed and confessional view from both the advocates of the traditional “real presence” view and from those who assert that the Lord’s Supper is a mere memorial.

Robert Shaw says: While our Confession rejects the doctrine of the Papists and of the Lutherans, respecting the Lord’s supper, it teaches that “the body and blood of Christ are as really, but spiritually, present to the faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves are to their outward senses.” Christ is not present in body at his table; and, therefore, we cannot see him there after the flesh; but he is present spiritually, and may be discerned by faith. From this it follows that the participation of Christ’s body and blood, in the holy supper, is spiritual. There is an external representation and confirmation of it, in participating of the sacred and instituted elements, which symbolise the broken body and shed blood of Christ. And while the worthy receivers outwardly partake of the visible elements in this sacrament, they inwardly, by faith, receive and feed upon Christ crucified, and the benefits of his death.

Van Dixhoorn: The remedy to a doctrine of the real physical presence of Christ is not a doctrine of real absence, but a doctrine of spiritual presence, and paragraph 7 presents that old Calvinistic doctrine of the spiritual presence of Christ in the supper. When we are properly receiving the supper (including an examination of ourselves, 1 Cor. 11:28), we are ‘inwardly’ partaking of Christ while ‘outwardly partaking of the visible elements’. The Apostle Paul calls this ‘participating’ or ‘fellowshipping’ in the blood and in the body of Christ (1 Cor. 10:16)—a concept which usefully challenges conventional assumptions in evangelicalism that the Lord’s supper is merely a memorial moment to remember Jesus.

This participation in Christ in the supper is ‘by faith’ and ‘spiritually’. That is to say, when we come to the supper, trusting afresh in Christ and the triumph of his cross, we find Christ present by his Holy Spirit in the supper. And through this meal we by faith receive him, with all the benefits of his death which are reserved for believers. We feed upon him. We are nourished by him. And although that receiving and feeding is not carnal or corporal, it is nevertheless real and actual.

To state it a different way, and even more emphatically, ‘the body and blood of Christ’ is not during the supper ‘corporally or carnally, in, with, or under the bread and wine’. Christ is not present in the body or in the flesh. No Catholic, or Lutheran, or ‘high Anglican’ formula of real presence in the sense of physical presence is correct. Nor are these doctrines necessary! Spiritual does not mean artificial. Spiritual realities are true realities. And so this confession rightly insists that Christ is present ‘really, but spiritually’ in the supper. He is as ‘present to the faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves’ are present ‘to their outward senses’.
Chapter 29 - Of the Lord’s Supper  January 30

(29.8 Only those who receive the Lord’s Supper by faith receive a blessing, unworthy partaker)

29.8 Although ignorant and wicked men receive the outward elements in this sacrament; yet, they receive not the thing signified thereby; but, by their unworthy coming thereunto, are guilty of the body and blood of the Lord, to their own damnation. Wherefore, all ignorant and ungodly persons, as they are unfit to enjoy communion with him, so are they unworthy of the Lord’s table; and cannot, without great sin against Christ, while they remain such, partake of these holy mysteries, or be admitted thereunto.

Commentary

Ward: The real but spiritual presence of Christ means only the worthy, only those who come through Christ, receive him. Unworthy participants are those who reject the way of faith. They spurn the grace and forgiveness won by Christ and hence add to their condemnation. Perhaps the words in 1 Corinthians 11:29 (‘For anyone who eats and drinks without recognising the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself’) have reference to one’s attitude to other believers, fellow members of the church, the body of Christ. Certainly the selfish spirit shown by some of the Corinthians is utterly contrary to the meaning of the sacrament in which we confess our utter and equal dependence upon Christ for salvation. This section also indicates the supervision of the table: only those are to be admitted who have a sufficient knowledge, who profess true faith and are living in an apparently godly way.

BTW, a tiny minority of the Reformed have advocated for the practice of paedo-communing (admitting very young children to the Lord’s Table before and apart from their being examined by the elders and being able to answer with understanding and responsibility the five questions of church membership historically used by Presbyterians). No major Reformed denomination in history has ever adopted this view, and there are many good arguments in favor of continuing the historic Reformed practice of only admitting professing believers to the Lord’s Table: (1) the partaking of the Lord’s Supper is an act of positive witness to one’s faith in the truth of the gospel. Those who eat and drink: do so “in remembrance of their Lord” (I Cor 11:24, 25). Moreover, as they do so, they proclaim the benefits those united to Him receive (I Cor 11:26). All of this, therefore, consists of a confession of faith on the part of those participating in the Lord’s Supper and points to a cordial and active acceptance of the gospel thus confessed. Consistency with this principle would demand the limitation of the Lord’s Supper to those of sufficient age and understanding to do so.

(2) Since participation at the Lord’s table is an active demonstration of the communicant’s faith, self-examination is necessary before coming to the Lord’s table. The Apostle Paul even tells us why this must be the case (I Cor 11:27-29). Such a proper discerning of the body requires a correct understanding of the gospel and all that it implies. And this, again, means a restriction of the second sacrament to those communicant members who alone qualify (I Cor. 11:31-32). Infants and non-professing children do not meet these apostolic and biblical requirements for “worthy” participation: self-examination (1 Cor. 11:28), and proper discernment of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 11:29). Cf. HC, Q. 81; BC, Art. 35; WLC, Q. 177.

(3) The Lord’s Supper is not more effectual than the preaching of the Word. Yet one gets that impression from the theologizing of some if not many who advocate for paedo-communion. Herman Bavinck’s point should be remembered, namely, that withholding the Lord’s Supper is not the same as withholding the Word would be. For the divine means of imparting faith is the Word alone, while the Lord’s Supper is an additional, confirmatory means to nourish and strengthen faith already imparted, as is also done by the Word. Therefore, let those who would actively participate in the second sacrament first give evidence of divinely imparted faith by means of a credible profession, and thereafter seek that divine means of grace supplied in the second sacrament that will more and more strengthen their faith and aid their growth.
Chapter 30 - Of Church Censures

30.1 The Lord Jesus, as king and head of his church, hath therein appointed a government, in the hand of church officers, distinct from the civil magistrate.

Commentary

Ward: According to Robert Baillie this section was expressly framed against Erastianism, the teaching that makes the civil power supreme and in effect makes the church a department of state. King James VI held that 'Presbytery agrees as well with a monarchy as God and the devil.' The statements expressed to him by Andrew Melville (1545-1622) in 1596 have sounded down the years. ‘Sir, as diverse times before I have told you, so now again I must tell you, - there are two Kings and two Kingdoms in Scotland; there is King James, the head of the commonwealth, and there is Christ Jesus, the head of the church, whose subject King James VI is, and of whose kingdom he is not a King, nor a Lord, not a Head but a member.’ In short, the Presbyterian view is to recognise the co-ordinate jurisdiction of both church and state, rather than placing one or other in the supreme place. Our service of God necessarily involves giving Caesar what belongs to him, but authority in the church is not among what belongs to him.

Van Dixhoorn: The first port of call for a chapter on church censures (church discipline) is the subject of church government. Thus the first paragraph of chapter 30 begins by identifying the governor himself: the Lord, whose name is Jesus.

In his verses about the coming servant king, Isaiah wrote about one who would carry on his shoulders a government, the increase of which would know no end (Isa. 9:6-7). This governor is the king and head of his church, the one with ‘all authority in heaven and on earth’. He issues the commands, as he did in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20). He is the one who appointed New Testament governors and government under himself. It should not need to be said that no mere mortal should seek for himself the title of head of the church, when the actions of our Lord, and the praise of his apostles, give this title to him alone (Eph. 1:22; 5:23; Col. 1:18).

The governors that Jesus Christ appoints under him are called ‘elders’ (1 Tim. 5:17; Acts 20:17-18) or ‘leaders’ (Heb. 13:7, 17, 24). Here they are simply called ‘church officers’. They have the gift of ‘governing’ or ‘administering’ (1 Cor. 12:28). The Christian church knows them as those who ‘labour among’ us and ‘over’ us. They are the people who sometimes ‘admonish’ us (1 Thess. 5:12). These are the hands used by the head of the church.

Christ’s government is administered by church officers, distinct from civil magistrates. Historically, the very fact of the independence of church government was resisted by both King and Parliament, for leaders in the state did not want to be accountable to a leadership in the church. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that in the New Testament Christ established a government that was churchly, or ecclesiastical, over Christians, and that government was separate from the civil government. We know this, historically, because the Roman civil government that was over Christians was opposed to the church, its message, and its work; and biblically, because only the government of the church would do the kind of work God commands elders to do: not just ruling, but preaching and teaching, speaking to us the Word of God, and ‘keeping watch over’ our souls (1 Tim. 5:17, Heb. 13:7, 17). The church is not the religious arm of the state; it is an institution distinct from the state and has its own unique purpose.
Chapter 30 - Of Church Censures

(30.2 Jesus has given the pastors and elders of the church the power of discipline)

30.2 To these officers the keys of the kingdom of heaven are committed; by virtue whereof, they have power, respectively, to retain, and remit sins; to shut that kingdom against the impenitent, both by the Word, and censures; and to open it unto penitent sinners, by the ministry of the gospel; and by absolution from censures, as occasion shall require.

Commentary

Van Dixhoorn: The focal point of church government is the power and exercise of what Jesus called 'the keys of the kingdom of heaven'. Here the confession is picking up language used in Matthew 16, where the keys of the kingdom are mentioned in the context of the pre-eminence of Christ. Before all the disciples Peter confessed Jesus as 'the Christ, the Son of the living God'. Our Lord commended him, and with a word play on Peter's name (which means 'rock') he promised, 'on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it' (Matt. 16:13-18).

It is a passage that underlines the government of Christ, his power, and rule over the church. Famously it is also the passage where Jesus goes on to declare to his disciples that they would be given 'the keys of the kingdom of heaven': 'whatever you bind on earth', Jesus says, 'will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven' (Matt. 16:19). Jesus gave these keys in Matthew 16 to his disciples, and in them to the governors or officers who rule his church.

Church officers are given the task of binding and loosing, or retaining and remitting sins—making judgments as to whether sinners are impenitent, unrepentant, and bound by Satan, or penitent, repentant, and freed for Christ. The same truth was taught again by our Lord, recorded only two chapters distant, in Matthew 18. There Jesus was again speaking with his disciples, this time giving instruction about church discipline. At the end of the discussion Jesus announced, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven' (Matt. 18:17-18). On yet another occasion, recorded in John 20:23, Jesus told his disciples, 'If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld' (John 20:23).

The message of these three passages is astonishing. It seems to be the plain point of these pronouncements in Matthew 16, 18, and John 20 that it is the responsibility of church officers to judge by the Word of God, as far as is possible, who is going to heaven and who is not. Church governors have power from Christ, 'respectively, to retain, and remit sins'. The elders of the church guide the body of Christ in determining whether someone is to be treated as a brother, as an erring brother, or as what Jesus called a Gentile or a tax collector. The elders 'shut that kingdom against the impenitent, both by the word and censures; and to open it unto penitent sinners, by the ministry of the gospel'. Sometimes, 'as occasion shall require', we leaders must preach stern words, and exercise real discipline. Sometimes, 'as occasion shall require', we must open wide the kingdom by preaching the gospel and offering release from correction. Officers offer what the Westminster assembly calls 'absolution from censures', and what the Apostle Paul calls a turning 'to forgive and comfort' (2 Cor. 2:7; cf verses 6-8). Even the most godly church officers are by no means perfect, as we all know, but they are appointed as gatekeepers who, 'as occasion shall require', sometimes shut the kingdom on Christ's behalf.

They do this by the word and by censures. The preaching of the Word alone lets some people know where they stand before God. The reading and preaching of the Word is the most commonly applied tool of discipline, for it convicts us of sin and drives us to repentance. Usually this is enough for us. Sometimes we need the censures of the church to have matters further clarified for us. Practically, this means that when the officers of a church examine a person for membership in the church, they are making an extremely decision. They need to decide whether or not they will give someone the assurance that, in their opinion, all is well with their soul. And when the elders travel a long way down the road of church discipline they often have to ask hard questions: does this person's life and testimony so contradict the Word of God that they must be put outside of the church and excluded from a present hope of heaven?
Chapter 30 - Of Church Censures

(30.3 Church discipline is necessary and beneficial to the church)

30.3 Church censures are necessary, for the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren, for deterring of others from the like offenses, for purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump, for vindicating the honor of Christ, and the holy profession of the gospel, and for preventing the wrath of God, which might justly fall upon the church, if they should suffer his covenant, and the seals thereof, to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders.

Commentary

Ward: Church discipline does not apply to every kind of sin but only to those sins which cause scandal or bring open reproach on the cause of Christ. Meddling with family concerns, or attempting to drag secret sins into the light, are not to be encouraged. Censurable offences may be public or private. Private offences do not include every breach of God’s law, but are those which cause offence, bring reproach or mar edification, and are known to a few. In these cases the procedure in Matthew 18:5 applies. Public offences are of a more flagrant and open kind. The first object of discipline is to get at the truth, and the ultimate object is to lead the guilty to repentance by Scriptural means that he might be restored.

Van Dixhoorn: Christ has a government in his church and it is called to administer discipline. But what are these censures for? Paragraph 3 summarizes five reasons why church discipline is necessary.

First, it is necessary ‘for reclaiming and gaining’ the offender. Discipline is intended to help sinners, to draw them back to the Lord. Jude urged Christians to save people ‘by snatching them out of the fire’ (Jude 23). The Apostle Paul told Timothy that Hymenaeus and Alexander were ‘handed over to Satan’. Why? So ‘that they may learn not to blaspheme’ (1 Tim. 1:20). The apostle urged the Corinthians to correct a man. Why? ‘So that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord’ (1 Cor. 5:5). He warned them about their sinful conduct at what they called the Lord’s supper. Why? Because he did not want them to ‘eat and drink judgment’ on themselves (1 Cor. 11:29). He later reminded them that ‘when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined’. Why? ‘So that we may not be condemned along with the world’ (1 Cor. 11:32).

Second, the chastisements of the church are necessary as a deterrent. Discipline is alarming. It focuses the minds of disciples and often discourages them from following the pattern of an offender. Paul told Timothy that when it came to people ‘who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear’ (1 Tim. 5:20). Censures help us avoid following the wrong people down the wrong path. God has a preventative purpose to discipline.

Third, God-ordained ecclesiastical punishments, such as those mentioned in paragraph 4, are necessary for keeping the germ of sin already present in the church from infecting the whole body. When Paul chided the Corinthians, who were reluctant to correct one of their own members, he used this third argument for church discipline with great force: ‘Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened’ (1 Cor. 5:6-7). Discipline purifies the church.

Fourth, church censures are necessary ‘for vindicating the honour of Christ, and the holy profession of the gospel’. What Christ offers to us is holy; it is a pearl of great price. We are to keep what is holy from those who act like dogs and pigs in the church (Matt. 7:6). Furthermore, God’s people are called to be godly. Jude says we are to hate ‘even the garment stained by the flesh’ (Jude 23). We discipline for Christ’s sake.

Finally, discipline is also sometimes necessary ‘for preventing the wrath of God, which might justly fall upon the church, if they should suffer his covenant, and the seals thereof, to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders’. Paul’s admonitions about the Lord’s supper, his mysterious comment in 1 Corinthians 11 about some offenders being weak, ill and dead—these are warnings about God’s displeasure against those who disrespected the seals of the covenant (the sacraments) or the covenant itself (the gospel). God is displeased with churches that tolerate sin—for example, allowing unrepentant sinners to partake of the supper or baptize their children. To avoid God’s displeasure, we must deal with sin faithfully, and that sometimes entails discipline. If only we judged more faithfully in the church, and more truly, the apostle tells us that we would not have to be judged by the Lord (1 Cor. 11:27-34).
Chapter 30 - Of Church Censures

(30.4 The censures of discipline are: admonition, suspension and excommunication)

30.4 For the better attaining of these ends, the officers of the church are to proceed by admonition; suspension from the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper for a season; and by excommunication from the church; according to the nature of the crime, and demerit of the person.

Commentary

Ward: Admonition consists in solemnly addressing the person found guilty, placing the person’s sin before him, warning him of his danger, and exhorting him to greater circumspection. Admonition may take the stronger form of rebuke, that is, a solemn expression of reproof and censure in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Suspension or temporary depriving of church privileges or office is resorted to when the gravity of the offence demands it, or where admonition or rebuke have proved ineffective. Sometimes an offence is such that it requires a person holding office to be deposed from it while his membership in the congregation is unaffected.

Excommunication is usually divided into the lesser and the greater. The lesser excommunication amounts to a formal removal of the person from the membership roll and declaring him no longer a member of the church. It is usually applied when an offence, although proved, is obstinately denied. Excommunication in its highest sense (1 Cor 5:4-5; 1 Tim 1:20) is for grave and flagrant sins, and involves the public pronouncing of the sentence of excommunication upon the impenitent person, and public prayer for his repentance. Concerning such a person ‘the people are to be warned that they hold that person to be cast out of the church, and that they shun all unnecessary converse with him or her; nevertheless, excommunication dissolveth not the bonds of civil or natural relations, nor exempts from the duties belonging to them’ (Form of Process, viii 17; General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 18 April 1707). A member who has been subject to discipline and is duly restored is entitled to be held in tender and brotherly regard by all his fellow members. The greater excommunication is relatively rare in Presbyterian circles, particularly in the 20th century. It is too rare.

Van Dixhoorn: It remains to be said that there are different kinds and degrees of censure to be carried out by the church’s officers (rather than the church’s congregation) for the attaining of any of these five ends. The method of discipline pursued, and the lengths to which it is pursued, should always take into consideration the nature of the wrong itself, the faults of the person, their response to correction and, we might add, God’s great grace to us.

Sometimes all that may be needed is admonition. This is the kind of rebuke that Paul urged the Thessalonians to accept from their leaders (1 Thess. 5:12).

Sometimes what may be required is suspension from the sacrament of the supper, at least for a time. This may be what Paul meant when he wrote to the Thessalonians about keeping away from disobedient brothers and sisters—that they might be ashamed and heed the warning, but still be treated as brethren (2 Thess. 3:6, 14-15).

Sometimes someone may need to be cut off from communion with the saints altogether: excommunication from the church. This is the severe treatment that Paul advocated for a member of the Corinthian church; it is also what Jesus commanded for those who refuse to listen to the church, and what Paul called Titus to do with divisive people who ignored multiple warnings (1 Cor. 5:4-5; Matt. 18:17; Titus 3:10). Yet even here, it is our hope that the sinner will be restored (1 Cor. 5:5). And as the church can testify with joy . . . they sometimes are!

M’Cheyne: ‘When I first entered upon the work of the ministry among you, I was exceedingly ignorant of the vast importance of church discipline. I thought that my great work and almost only work was to pray and preach...But it pleased God, who teaches his servants in another way than man teaches, to bless some of the cases of discipline to the manifest and undeniable conversion of the souls of those under our care; and from that hour a new light broke into my mind, and I saw that if preaching be an ordinance of Christ, so is church discipline.’ R.M.McCheyne (1813-1843) Life of Robert Murray-McCheyne by Andrew Bonar (reprint London 1960), 87-88.
Chapter 31 - Of Synods and Councils

31.1 For the better government, and further edification of the church, there ought to be such assemblies as are commonly called synods or councils: and it belongeth to the overseers and other rulers of the particular churches, by virtue of their office, and the power which Christ hath given them for edification and not for destruction, to appoint such assemblies; and to convene together in them, as often as they shall judge it expedient for the good of the church.

Original WCF 31.1
For the better government, and further edification of the church, there ought to be such assemblies, as are commonly called synods or councils.

Commentary
A synod is a formal meeting of church leaders. The word *synod* comes from the Greek συνόδος (*synodos*) meaning assembly or meeting, and it is synonymous with the Latin word *concilium* meaning “council.”

So if you are ARP you go to Synod and if you are PCA, EPC, OPC you go to General Assembly, but the different terms mean the same thing. Of course, just to make things confusing, the PC(USA) and the old PCUS have/had General Assembly and Synods (in their case, synods were lower, regional courts than General Assembly, in between presbyteries and GA).

This section of chapter 31 is about the right to call for a church assembly or synod or council. Ward says: The right of assembly is here asserted. The term ‘synod’ is used in a wide sense for an assembly of church office-bearers beyond a single congregation, and so includes presbyteries, synods, general assemblies and special gatherings such as Westminster itself.

The debate behind the change to the American edition of the Confession is about who has the right to call such assemblies. The American version (following the Scottish Adopting Act) explicitly asserts that the ministers and elders of the church have the right to call for these assemblies (as opposed to secular authorities having the right to call them, as was the case with the Westminster assembly itself).

Van Dixhoorn: The case for councils can easily be made from Scripture, for we see at least one ecclesiastical assembly or synod in the early days of the church: the council of Jerusalem, where, following a dispute in Antioch, leaders gathered in Jerusalem and discussed what they should do (*Acts 15:2-4*; see also *Acts 6:1-7*). What makes the council of Jerusalem so significant for later generations of Christians is that it was held at a time when the apostles were active and yet chose to call a gathering of elders. Time and again the fact that the elders joined with the apostles in the deliberative process is highlighted in the account provided by Luke (*Acts 15:2, 4, 6*). This fact, among others, has signalled to later generations that the apostles were not pulling rank and speaking at the council in their office as apostles, but in their office as elders.

When the Scottish Presbyterians adopted the Westminster Confession, they made it clear that they saw certain things in this chapter that could be construed as in conflict with the presbyterian polity of the Church of Scotland, and so they made it clear in the Adopting Act that Scottish Presbyterian polity was not going to be modified by their adoption of the content of this chapter.
Chapter 31 - Of Synods and Councils

(31.2 What church councils can do)

31.2 It belongeth to synods and councils, ministerially to determine controversies of faith, and cases of conscience; to set down rules and directions for the better ordering of the public worship of God, and government of his church; to receive complaints in cases of maladministration, and authoritatively to determine the same: which decrees and determinations, if consonant to the Word of God, are to be received with reverence and submission; not only for their agreement with the Word, but also for the power whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God appointed thereunto in his Word.

Commentary

Ward: This section in its original form was qualified in the Act of the Church of Scotland adopting the Confession in 1647 (see text on page 278), and has thus been reworded in line with the explanation there given. The original wording stated (1) the lawfulness of the civil ruler calling a synod, and (2) the right of the church to hold synods if the civil ruler was an open enemy of the church. This wording was considered not sufficiently strong in its assertion of the liberties of the church under Christ. It was the view of Scottish Presbyterians in the Covenanting period that the liberty of calling religious assemblies and meeting in them was essential to the maintenance of the Gospel.

The American church early combined sections 1 and 2 into a statement generally in line with the Scottish qualification although without reference to the right of the civil ruler to call a synod in cases where the church was not organised.

Van Dixhoorn: Synods and councils, whether small and local, or large and international, are called to serve the master of the church. They are to offer verdicts based on his revealed will, as did the apostles (as ministers) and elders (as governors) in Acts 15 when they made a judgment based on the words of the prophets recorded in Scripture (Acts 15:15). In this way, these bodies serve ‘ministerially’, or minister as Christ’s servants. And they do so in three principal ways.

First, assemblies are to ‘determine controversies of faith’ and make judgments about ethical and theological issues (what used to be called ‘cases of conscience’). Councils can help settle troubled minds, and sort out troubling disagreements. This is just what James and others with him did at the council of Jerusalem in their debate about the treatment of the Gentiles (Acts 15:19, 24, 27-31).

Second, synods or councils can ‘set down rules and directions’ to ‘better order’ both public worship and church governance. In the first chapter of this confession the Westminster assembly argued ‘that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word’ (WCF 1.6). Examples of wisdom applied to worship and government can be found in directories for worship, which include instructions about the order of a worship service, or in directories for church government, which include various steps taken in ecclesiastical discipline, or toward the training and ordination of ministers. In this thirty-first chapter the Westminster assembly is simply asserting that synods and councils can play a part in ordering and directing these secondary matters.

Third, synods and councils are to receive complaints (including appeals) and make determinations about them. It seemed to the Presbyterians at the Westminster assembly that it was a principle of the light of nature, a seemingly intuitive truth revealed by God, that synods and councils were needed as courts of appeal for accusations of administrative injustice — procedural faults or unfairness in the hearing of a case at a local church. Just as Jesus directed people to make an appeal to the church (Matt. 18:17-20), so, by way of analogy, people should be able to make an appeal within the church as we see, again, in Acts 15.
Chapter 31 - Of Synods and Councils

(31.3 Church councils are meant to be a help to the faith and practice of the church)

31.3 All synods or councils, since the apostles’ times, whether general or particular, may err; and many have erred. Therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith, or practice; but to be used as a help in both.

Commentary

Ward: This statement is in agreement with the facts of history as different Councils have contradicted each other on very important issues. Still, Protestants do not despise the decisions of the General Councils to AD 451, and their doctrinal conclusions are embodied in the Westminster Confession. Since the First Vatican Council (1870) the Pope has been regarded by Rome as the final authority in matters of faith and morals, thus placing a General Council on a lesser level. This section also applies to the Confession since it is not inspired or infallible but seeks simply to set forth the teaching of Scripture in concise form. It is not the final authority but Scripture is (cf. WCF 1: 2). Nevertheless, those who subscribe the Confession, voluntarily acknowledging its doctrine to be agreeable to Scripture, are not in a position to repudiate the doctrine and remain within the communion of which the Confession is the bond.

Van Dixhoorn: Regardless of the claims of Roman Catholics or the contentions of any number of cults, there is no human leadership, either individual or collective, that can be kept from error. ... This is all the more apparent when we join the assembly in making an historical observation: that when one considers the decisions of ‘synods and councils since the apostles’ times, whether general or particular . . . many have erred’. Whether deemed ecumenical councils or local synods, we know that these councils must have erred, since they sometimes contradict one another, and truly opposing opinions cannot both be correct.

We also know that they have erred because they contradict the teaching of Scripture. One only has to think of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1213 which helpfully clarified the doctrine of the Trinity, but also formally adopted the flawed doctrine of transubstantiation (see WCF 29.6); or the Council of Trent meeting in phases between 1545 and 1563, which ruthlessly attacked the biblical doctrine of justification (see WCF 11.1).

It is because councils may err, and have erred, that the assembly gives its two biblical directives. On the one hand, councils and synods ‘are not to be made the rule of faith, or practice’. This follows from the teaching of Scripture itself. If the church is founded on the ‘apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone’ (Eph. 2:20), then we need to look to the record of their teachings preserved in the Scriptures. If the examination of even apostolic teaching is commended by God, in the case of the noble Berean Christians who compared the words of Paul’s preaching with the Word of God (Acts 17:11), then we cannot make any other text our norm for doctrine or duty. The best councils have summoned many wise men, but if we are warned in Scripture that our faith should not ‘rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God’ (1 Cor. 2:5), then we cannot make the determination of ecumenical assemblies or local leaders a rule for our faith and practice. If the apostles themselves refused to ‘lord’ their position over the faith of believers, and called Christians to stand firm in their faith (2 Cor. 1:24), then it is not the place of any council to command to command our consciences on its own authority. The limits of conciliar power are established, Scripture being our supreme guide. In true wisdom the Westminster assembly acknowledged this limitation and redirected its readers to Holy Scripture (cf. WCF 1.4, 1.5, 1.10).

On the other hand, councils and synods are ‘to be used as a help in both’ faith and practice. We see this in Scripture itself, certainly in Acts 15, and probably also in Acts 6. Hopefully, we can see the wisdom of listening to, and learning the Christian faith from, gatherings of learned leaders who are well-versed in the Bible and fluent in theology.

Hopefully, as we re-examine our Christian practice, we will never be so focused on what the Holy Spirit is teaching us that we will have no interest in what he has taught others. Certainly the Westminster assembly was hoping that others would learn from its discussions (which is perhaps why scribes were hired to record its debates). But they also expected that people would learn from their decisions, which is why the divines came to Westminster and subsequently submitted their confession to the English and Scottish Parliaments for use in the churches.
Chapter 31 - Of Synods and Councils

(31.4 What church councils may and may not address)

31.4 Synods and councils are to handle, or conclude nothing, but that which is ecclesiastical: and are not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth, unless by way of humble petition in cases extraordinary; or, by way of advice, for satisfaction of conscience, if they be thereunto required by the civil magistrate.

Commentary

A.A. Hodge: These Sections state—(1.) The different subjects which come before these church courts for decision. (2.) The grounds upon which, and the conditions under which, their decisions are to be regarded as requiring submission, and the extent to which that submission is to be carried.

1st. Negatively. Synods and councils have no right whatever to intermeddle with any affair which concerns the commonwealth, and they have no right to presume to give advice to, or to attempt to, influence the officers of the civil government in their action as civil officers, except (a) in extraordinary cases, where the interests of the Church are immediately concerned, by the way of humble petition, or (b) by way of advice for satisfaction of conscience, if they be thereunto required by the civil magistrate.

2d. Negatively. The powers of synods and councils are purely ministerial and declarative; i.e., relate simply to the declaration and execution of the will of Christ. They are therefore wholly judicial and executive, and in no instance legislative.

3d. Positively. It belongs to synods and councils (a) at proper times to form creeds and confessions of faith, and to adopt a constitution for the government of the Church. (b) To determine particular controversies of faith and cases of conscience. (c) To prescribe regulations for the public worship of God, and for the government of the Church. (d) To take up and issue all cases of discipline, and, in the case of the superior courts, to receive appeals and complaints in all cases of maladministration in the case of individual officers or subordinate courts, and authoritatively to determine the same.

4th. Positively. While ecclesiastical courts have no right to handle or advise upon matters which belong to the jurisdiction of the civil magistrate, they, on the other hand, evidently possess an inalienable right of teaching church members their duty with respect to the civil powers, and of enforcing the performance of it as a religious obligation. “The powers that be are ordained of God. . . . Wherefore ye must needs be subject not only for wrath, but also for conscience’ sake.” Rom. 13:1—7. That is, obedience to the civil authorities is a religious duty, and may be taught and enforced by Church courts upon church members.

5th. Negatively. All synods and councils since the apostles’ times, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice; but to be used as a help in both. That is, these synods and councils, consisting of uninspired men, have no power to bind the conscience, and their authority cannot exclude the right, nor excuse the obligation, of private judgment. If their judgments are unwise, but not directly opposed to the will of God, the private member should submit for peace’ sake. If their decisions are opposed plainly to the word of God, the private member should disregard them and take the penalty.

6th. Positively. But in every case in which the decrees of these ecclesiastical courts are consonant to the word of God, they are to be received by all subject to the jurisdiction of said court, not only because of the fact that they do agree with the word of God, but also because of the proper authority of the court itself as a court of Jesus Christ, appointed by him, and therefore ministerially representing him in all of its legitimate actions.
Chapter 32 - Of the State of Men After Death and of the Resurrection of the Dead  
(32.1 The intermediate state, for believers and unbelievers)

32.1 The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption: but their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them: the souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies. And the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day. Beside these two places, for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledgeth none.

Rowland Ward’s analysis of WCF 32

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Commentary

Ward: Human physical death is one of the consequences of sin (Gen 2:17; Rom 5:12), but it cannot sever the spiritual union with Christ which the believer now enjoys. Jesus teaches that the body can be destroyed when the soul is safe (Matt 10:28). Paul can say that to depart and be with Christ is better for him (Phil 1:23), for he has a closer fellowship with Christ than if he remains here. The believer is sometimes described as asleep in Jesus, for in the fulness of Christ’s salvation his redemption will be perfected at the resurrection. The body is still cared for by Christ who died and rose again to save the whole person, not a disembodied person (cf. the beautiful words of Shorter Catechism 37). ‘If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you’ (Rom 8:11).

Jesus contrasts eternal life and eternal death (Matt 25:46), and speaks more of the fire of hell, the outer darkness and the endless destruction than anyone else. Such images are drawn from our own experience here but they speak of a reality worse than the images. They cannot be made to fit the teaching that the wicked will be annihilated so that immortality is conditional - for believers only. The truth is that we need to focus on the justice of God. We could not worship God if he was immoral, making no distinction between good and evil. He will punish the wicked, but the punishment is based strictly on the demerit of the individual not on some arbitrary standard. ‘Not one soul will be in hell who does not deserve to be; and no one’s hell will be deeper or darker than is right. God’s wrath cannot be compromised by miscarriages of justice.’ (Donald Macleod) At physical death the unbeliever knows the judgment of God for his sin, and at the resurrection this judgment is confirmed.
Chapter 32 - Of the State of Men After Death and of the Resurrection of the Dead

(32.2 The General Resurrection)

32.2 At the last day, such as are found alive shall not die, but be changed: and all the dead shall be raised up, with the selfsame bodies, and none other (although with different qualities), which shall be united again to their souls forever.

Commentary

A.A. Hodge: These Sections (32.2-3) teach—
1st. That at the last day there will be a simultaneous resurrection of all the dead, both of the just and of the unjust.
2d. That those who then remain living on the earth shall not die, but be changed.
3d. That the very same bodies that are buried in the earth shall be raised and reunited to their souls, their identity preserved, although their qualities will be changed.
4th. That the bodies of believers shall be made like Christ’s glorious body— “a spiritual body.”
5th. That the bodies of the reprobate shall be raised to dishonour.

1st. At the last day there will be a simultaneous resurrection of all the dead, both of the just and the unjust. “And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” Dan. 12:2. “Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all who are in the graves shall hear his voice and shall come forth; they that have done good unto the resurrection of life, and they that have done evil unto the resurrection of damnation.” John 5:28, 29. The two classes are to be judged simultaneously, immediately after their resurrection upon the second coming of the Lord. The sheep shall stand on the right side and the goats upon the left. “And these shall go away into everlasting punishment, and the righteous into life eternal.” Matt. 25:31–46; Rom. 2:6–16; 2 Tim. 1:6–10; Rev. 20:11–15.

2d. Those who are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not outstrip them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel and the trump of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. 1 Thess. 4:15–17. “We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.” 1 Cor. 15:51, 52.

3d. The very same bodies that are buried in the earth shall be raised and reunited to their souls, their identity preserved, although their qualities are changed. This is explicitly declared in Scripture: “Our vile body is to be changed.” Phil. 3:21. “This corruptible is to put on incorruption.” 1 Cor. 15:53, 54. “All who are in their graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth.” John 5:28. “They who are asleep, . . . the dead in Christ shall rise.” 1 Thess. 4:13–17. Our bodies are now members of Christ, and they are to be raised in a manner analogous to his resurrection, which we know to have been of his identical body, by the print of the nails and of the spear. It was seen and handled for the space of forty days in order to establish this very fact. Luke 24:39; Acts 1:3; 1 Cor. 15:4.

4th. These changes will doubtless be very great. The body of the believer is to be made like unto Christ’s glorious body. Phil. 3:21. . . . The spiritual body will be still material and identical with the body which was once animal, but it will be suited to the new wants of the spirits of just men made perfect—to their new stage of development, intellectual and spiritual—to their social relations, and to the physical conditions of the “new heavens and the new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.” 2 Pet. 3:12, 13.
32.3 The Difference between believers and unbelievers in the General Resurrection

32.3 The bodies of the unjust shall, by the power of Christ, be raised to dishonor: the bodies of the just, by his Spirit, unto honor, and be made conformable to his own glorious body.

Commentary

Van Dixhoorn: As Paul implied in the passage from 1 Corinthians just quoted, and in the verse prior to the citation from 1 Thessalonians, the last day will also be a redefining, and reconstituting, moment for those who have died. 'The dead shall be raised up, with the self-same bodies' that they had while alive. It is challenging to comprehend how this can be the case for bodies that have been ravaged and destroyed, first in this life, and then completely in the grave.

It is because we baulk at this possibility that God gave us the book of Job. There we see Job's incredible confidence, uttered even as his heart fainted within him. For what could be a clearer expression of confidence in a future resurrection and reconstitution of the body, than his assurance to his friends, that even 'after my skin has been . . . destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God'. The deliberate phrasing of his confession emphasizes his expectation of seeing God in his own body. And lest anyone should miss this point, the patriarch went on to say that he would see God 'for myself'. Yes 'my eyes shall behold, and not another'(Job 19:26-27).

For those Christians who have died, and will die, before the return of their Lord, they will on that day be raised with their own bodies, although the promise of 'change' in the Scriptures indicates that their bodies will have 'different qualities'. The Scriptures assure us that at the resurrection of the dead we shall be raised 'imperishable', with bodies characterized by 'glory' and 'power'. These will be real physical bodies even though they are 'spiritual bodies'—that is, bodies characterized by the glory and power of the spiritual realm (1 Cor. 15:42-44).

And lest we forget, the confession reminds us that this reunion of soul and body is permanent. It is a union that will last 'for ever'. All people will in some sense live forever, although for those who are isolated from God their eternal existence will be experienced as an eternal death.

In fact the horror of this reality is the first point in the final paragraph of this chapter. Yes, the resurrection will be a resurrection 'of both the just and the unjust' (Acts 24:15). Yes, 'an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out' (John 5:28-29). Yes, by the power of Christ the bodies of those who are unrighteous shall be brought to life. But there is no promise of power, of glory, or anything good for those resurrected and reunited people. The Scriptures say nothing about the resurrected bodies of the wicked. Suffice it to say that they will 'be raised to dishonour'.

The bodies of the just, or the righteous, on the other hand, will have an entirely different experience and existence. 'The bodies of the just, by his Spirit' will be raised to 'honour; and be made conformable' to the 'glorious body' of Jesus Christ. We shall be remade after his pattern. Astonishingly, for those who look to Christ, the dishonour and the weakness that characterize us now will be gone forever (1 Cor. 15:43). The life-long process of being made more Christlike shall be in that moment totally complete. United to the resurrected Saviour, at our resurrection we shall finally be like him. By the agency of his Spirit (a fact not emphasized with respect to the resurrection of the unjust), and by the immense 'power that enables him . . . to subject all things to himself', Christ 'will transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body' (Phil. 3:21).

Our first honour on the last day will be greater than every honour granted on any day. And yet it remains the case that this is a 'mystery' (1 Cor. 15:51). We do not know what imperishable bodies will be like: how our bodies will be the same, yet different; what stage of development our bodies will be in or whether there will be such a thing. But we do know that at the last day perfected souls will be given perfect and honourable bodies, and wicked persons be clothed with imperissably dishonourable bodies. Given what we do not know, and especially what we do, let us seek first the kingdom of God, and everything else will fall into place.
Chapter 33 - Of the Last Judgment

February 11

(33.1 God’s Final Judgment of the World, by Jesus Christ)

33.1 God hath appointed a day, wherein he will judge the world, in righteousness, by Jesus Christ, to whom all power and judgment is given of the Father. In which day, not only the apostate angels shall be judged, but likewise all persons that have lived upon earth shall appear before the tribunal of Christ, to give an account of their thoughts, words, and deeds; and to receive according to what they have done in the body, whether good or evil.

Commentary

J.I. Packer: The certainty of final judgment forms the frame within which the New Testament message of saving grace is set. Paul in particular stresses this certainty, highlighting it to the sophisticated Athenians (Acts 17:30–31) and spelling it out in detail in the first section of Romans, the New Testament book that contains his fullest exposition of the gospel (Rom. 2:5–16). It is from “the coming wrath” on “the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed,” says Paul, that Jesus Christ saves us (1 Thess. 1:10; Rom. 2:5; cf. Rom. 5:9; Eph. 5:6; Col. 3:6; John 3:36; Rev. 6:17; 19:15). Throughout Scripture, God’s indignation, anger, and fury, which are often spoken of, are judicial; these words always point to the holy Creator actively judging sin, just as wrath does here. The message of coming judgment for all mankind, with Jesus Christ completing the work of his mediatorial kingdom by acting as judge on his Father’s behalf, runs throughout the New Testament (Matt. 13:40–43; 25:41–46; John 5:22–30; Acts 10:42; 2 Cor. 5:10; 2 Tim. 4:1; Heb. 9:27; 10:25–31; 12:23; 2 Pet. 3:7; Jude 6–7; Rev. 20:11–15). When Christ comes again and history is completed, all humans of all ages will be raised for judgment and will take their place before Christ’s judgment seat. The event is unimaginable, no doubt, but human imagination is no measure of what a sovereign God can and will do.

At the judgment all will give account of themselves to God, and God through Christ “will give to each person according to what he has done” (Rom. 2:6; cf. Ps. 62:12; Matt. 16:27; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 22:12). The regenerate, who as servants of Christ have learned to love righteousness and desire the glory of a holy heaven, will be acknowledged, and on the basis of Christ’s atonement and merit on their behalf they will be awarded that which they seek. The rest will receive a destiny commensurate with the godless way of life they have chosen, and that destiny will come to them on the basis of their own demerit (Rom. 2:6–11). How much they knew of the will of God will be the standard by which their demerit is assessed (Matt. 11:20–24; Luke 11:42–48; Rom. 2:12).

The judgment will demonstrate, and so finally vindicate, the perfect justice of God. In a world of sinners, in which God has “let all nations go their own way” (Acts 14:16), it is no wonder that evil is rampant and that doubts arise as to whether God, if sovereign, can be just, or, if just, can be sovereign. But for God to judge justly is his glory, and the Last Judgment will be his final self-vindication against the suspicion that he has ceased to care about righteousness (Ps. 50:16–21; Rev. 6:10; 16:5–7; 19:1–5).

In the case of those who profess to be Christ’s, review of their actual words and works (Matt. 12:36–37) will have the special point of uncovering the evidence that shows whether their profession is the fruit of an honest regenerate heart (Matt. 12:33–35) or merely the parrot-cry of a hypocritical religiosity (Matt. 7:21–23). Everything about everybody will be exposed on Judgment Day (1 Cor. 4:5), and each will receive from God according to what he or she really is. Those whose professed faith did not express itself in a new life-style, marked by hatred of sin and works of loving service to God and others, will be lost (Matt. 18:23–35; 25:34–46; James 2:14–26).

Fallen angels (demons) will be judged on the last day (Matt. 8:29; Jude 6), and the saints will be involved in the process (1 Cor. 6:3), though Scripture does not reveal their precise role.

Knowledge of future judgment is always a summons to present repentance. Only the penitent will be prepared for judgment when it comes.
Chapter 33 - Of the Last Judgment

(33.2 The Divine Purpose of the Final Judgment)

33.2 The end of God's appointing this day is for the manifestation of the glory of his mercy, in the eternal salvation of the elect; and of his justice, in the damnation of the reprobate, who are wicked and disobedient. For then shall the righteous go into everlasting life, and receive that fullness of joy and refreshing, which shall come from the presence of the Lord; but the wicked who know not God, and obey not the gospel of Jesus Christ, shall be cast into eternal torments, and be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power.

Commentary

Van Dixhoorn: In one of Jesus' best known pictures of the judgment day, he speaks of the separation of the sheep and the goats. The sheep are blessed by the Father, and ushered into their eternal inheritance. The goats are cursed, commanded to depart from God and to enter the eternal fire first prepared for the devil and his angels (Matt. 25:31-46).

The most surprising aspect to Jesus' account of the day is that both groups contest what they deserve. Believers are told that they satisfied their Lord's hunger, slaked his thirst, welcomed him, clothed him, identified with him even in his suffering. In other words, they loved him. When they deny that they were so good, they are assured that in loving the Lord's people, they also loved him. With the unbelievers, the story is a total reversal. Jesus judges that they ignored his hunger and thirst; refused to welcome, clothe, or minister to him in prison. In other words, they did not care for him. Naturally they protest: they are better than he thinks. But the Lord confirms his judgment, for in despising his people, they despised him too.

Both reactions are striking in their own way. On the one hand, it is plain that God's people are finally, on the judgment day, at their wisest. They see no good in themselves. Faced with the awesome holiness of God, the imagined holiness which we parade during this life completely disappears. For Christians, this last day is a display of God's grace, 'a manifestation of the glory of his mercy' in their 'eternal salvation'. They will be saved because they are objects of electing love, and for no other reason.

On the other hand, it is painfully evident that on the same day God's enemies are at their most foolish. Face to face with the judge, they are more brazen in their declarations of worthiness than ever before; they lived their lives in their own sufficiency and they stick to their lines to the bitter end. They will not understand it, but for them, this day is a display of 'his justice', resulting in 'the damnation of the reprobate, who are wicked and disobedient'. They will be judged both because they are reprobate, and because they are 'wicked and disobedient'.

Although great throngs will stand before the seat of judgment, the first focus on the final day, will be on God, not man. On the day of judgment the world will finally know for sure who are God's elect, and who are the reprobate. Nonetheless the chief event will be the presentation of God's character, as his glory is seen in his unfailing mercy and in his true justice. This is the 'end' or the purpose in 'God's appointing this day'. It is to manifest something glorious about his mercy, about his justice, ultimately about himself.

In this judgment God's mercy will be amply exhibited. It will be seen in his endurance, 'with much patience', of those who were destined for destruction (Rom. 9:22). It will be seen in the way in which he fashioned 'vessels of mercy, which he . . . prepared beforehand for glory' (Rom. 9:23). It will be seen in his over-generous assessment of his 'good and faithful' servants, who were 'faithful over a little' but are now set 'over much' and 'enter into the joy' of their master (Matt. 25:21). In short, 'the righteous' enter 'everlasting life, and receive that fulness of joy and refreshing' which comes from the 'presence of the Lord'.

In this judgment, God's justice will also be on display, a grim spectacle that all will see. There are those with a 'hard and impenitent heart' who are 'storing up wrath . . . when God's righteous judgment will be revealed'. They will be judged 'each one according to his works' (Rom. 2:5-6). These are the people who will be shown wrath; people 'prepared for destruction' (Rom. 9:22). These are the people who should dread the day 'when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus' (2 Thess. 1:8). And as the righteous are blessed by entering God's presence, the wicked are cursed by being cast from it. 'They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might' (2 Thess. 1:9).

The judgment day is primarily a declaration about the Lord. But it is an event that should inject urgency into Christian conversations with the unconverted. Given the glory of the eternal state for believers, and the horror of the eternal state for the lost, the Bible's message to all unbelievers is not only clear, but also emphatic: 'repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out' (Acts 3:19).
Chapter 33 - Of the Last Judgment

(33.3 The timing of the return of Christ and final judgment is unknown)

33.3 As Christ would have us to be certainly persuaded that there shall be a day of judgment, both to deter all men from sin; and for the greater consolation of the godly in their adversity: so will he have that day unknown to men, that they may shake off all carnal security, and be always watchful, because they know not at what hour the Lord will come; and may be ever prepared to say, Come Lord Jesus, come quickly, Amen.

Commentary

Ward: Scripture teaches that the fact of the judgment to come has a bearing on present living: it deters some from evil and gives comfort to those who suffer injustice here and now. Scripture links indifference to the truth of Christ’s coming in judgment to careless and evil conduct, while belief in this truth is a stimulus to godliness.

Jesus stated that he did not know the time of his return (Matt 24:36). As the Son of God he knows, but as the Mediator it was not given him to know and reveal it. How foolish for us to suppose we can know or even to say we cannot know the exact time but Scripture provides signs which indicate an approximate date.

Wars and rumours of war, famines, earthquakes, false prophets and false Christs are characteristic of the whole period before Christ’s return, and do not provide specific time indications. Similarly, the fact that the gospel must be preached in the whole world and that there are to be many called from the Jewish people are not so clear in meaning that we can identify a fulfilment with dogmatism. The major emphasis of the NT is the call to steady-fastness in a hostile environment, the call to faithful service so that the coming of Christ will not mean loss but joy. Further, the Christian does not set his hope on some better day for the church before the end, however confident he may be that such days will come, for such days are not the fullness of glory. The horizon of the believer’s hope is the return of Christ and the ushering in of a new heaven and a new earth where righteousness has its home.

A.A. Hodge: This Section teaches — 1st. That God has made the fact absolutely certain that there will be a future judgment, in order that this knowledge may act upon all men as a wholesome motive deterring them from sin, and, at the same time, that it may console the godly in the midst of their adversity. With reference to the first object, Paul says, “We must all appear before the judgment-seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad. Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men.” 2 Cor. 5:10, 11. And Peter says, “Seeing, then, that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, looking for and hastening unto the coming of the day of God?” 2 Pet. 3:12. With reference to the second object, Paul says, “Seeing it is a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation to them that trouble you, and to you that are troubled, rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels.” 2 Thess. 1:7.

2d. That on the other hand, God has left us in absolute uncertainty with respect to the time at which this great event shall occur, in order to prevent carnal security and to keep his people ever on the alert and constantly prepared. That the time is intentionally left unknown is expressly affirmed again and again in Scripture: “But of that day and that hour knoweth no man; no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father.” Mark 13:32; Matt. 24:36. “Be ye, therefore, ready also, for the Son of man cometh at an hour when ye think not.” Luke 12:40. “It is not for you to know the times or the seasons which the Father has put in his own power.” Acts 1:7. “The day of the Lord cometh as a thief in the night.” 1 Thess. 1:2; 2 Pet. 3:10. “Behold I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth and keepeth his garments.” Rev. 16:15.

The designed effect of the attitude of uncertainty with regard to the time of the second advent and general judgment in which the saints are placed is, that they should regard it as always immediately impending; that they should look forward to it with solemn awe, and yet with joyful confidence; and hence in view of it, be incited to the performance of duty and the attainment of holiness, and comforted in sorrow. Phil. 3:20; Col. 3:4, 5; James 5:7. It is their duty also to love, watch, wait for and hasten unto the coming of our Lord. Luke 12:35–37; 1 Cor. 1:7, 8; 1 Thess. 1:9, 10; 2 Tim. 4:8; 2 Pet. 3:12; Rev. 22:20.