

Biblical Theology by Dr. Chuck Baynard

Lesson 8 (HCLD 21)¹

Preparation: Begin and end each study time with prayer. Pay particular attention to the background reading and pray over each passage asking God to reveal Himself to you.

Background Reading: Read all the Scripture verses in footnote # 1 & 2

Vocabulary: Decree, Creation, Providence, Proof-text, Foreknowledge, Grace, Free

Question: How doth God execute his decrees?

Answer: God executes his decrees in the works of creation and providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will. ²

We stand in awe as the Westminster Assembly put forward one single proof text, then upon that foundation lays a work of tremendous height, which sings of the glory of God, as it declares Him the Sovereign of all. How we could wish that the church throughout the ages had such confidence in the Word of God. “. . . who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will” (Eph. 1:11). Today’s scholars would treat us to a lengthy explanation of what the author had in mind when he used the word all, or how by tradition one area or another was excluded from a definition of all. God did not give to us a secret code book, but His word revealed. What does it say, what does it mean, and what am I supposed to do about it are the only valid questions. There may be many applications for a passage of Scripture, there is only one interpretation.³ God spoke to human beings in a human language composed of words. These words had meaning to the original hearers and this meaning has not, will not change.

¹ Heidelberg Catechism Q54: What do you believe concerning the "Holy Catholic Church"?

A54: That out of the whole human race,[a] from the beginning to the end of the world,[b] the Son of God,[c] by His Spirit and Word,[d] gathers, defends and preserves for Himself unto everlasting life a chosen communion [e] in the unity of the true faith;[f] and that I am and forever shall remain a living member of this communion.[g]

[a] Gen. 26:4

[b] John 10:10

[c] Eph. 1:10-13

[d] Rom. 1:16; 10:14-17; Isa. 59:21; Eph. 5:26

[e] Rom. 8:29-30; Matt. 16:18; Eph. 4:3-6

[f] Acts 2:46; Psa. 71:18; I Cor. 1:8-9; 11:26; John 10:28-30

[g] I John 2:19; 3:21; Gal. 3:28

² Eph. 1:11

³ To interpret means to explain. It is not a mysterious process of profound scholars.

We could perhaps enter into a discussion of the scholarship of the past and that of the present day. We would lose by a league. The generations of the reformation had a command of language that in its simplicity removed debate, and left all who would argue as mere cavilers before the Sovereign God of the universe. I dare say none today would word this question or answer in this way, and none would dare make such a bold proclamation from *only one proof-text*. We seem to have forgotten that the beginning of wisdom is the fear of God. But then, we don't fear anything, even God. My soul cries out as I see those who would profess to be of God, with such abandon make use of His Holy Word as if it were no more than an ancient work of man. This is a divine word, a living word of the living God and cannot be properly understood apart from the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. As we dealt with the election (Lesson 7) and now how this election is carried out in history we are delving into the eternal counsel and mystery of God. The Bible does not give us exhaustive details of this counsel. It is received by faith and founded on what God has chosen to reveal to us in the Bible. If there is any doubt that we have God's very word, then we have no foundation to build upon.

This is not forbidden territory where man dare not venture. This is the heart of Reformed doctrine. There is a limit to how far into this mystery of God we can or even should attempt to venture. However God did choose to open the subject to us and provide the insight needed to understand His word to us. It takes the acceptance of the Bible as the very word of God having full authority in our lives however to make statements concerning these things. While there are places, the Assembly at Westminster could have perhaps used different words, or were answering the issues facing the church of their day alone, but for the most part their choice of wording was very deliberate and the best explanation of the doctrine as the Bible teaches it.

Which of us would have chosen the word execute? Yet no other properly describes what God has, is, and will do until in His own time, He calls the end to the world as we know it. To take the words of this answer and sit with a dictionary in hand and contemplate each is a worthy exercise. Each word was chosen carefully and debated within the Assembly until it was agreed the wording was in accord with the Bible.

We will deal with creation and providence in length in the following questions. At the moment I want to draw our attention to the later half of the answer. The Westminster Divines as their Dutch predecessors a scant twenty plus years before, were careful not to give ground to the error of Arminian theology.⁴ So while we can

⁴ The Arminian controversy was answered by the Synod of Dort in 1619 in a document that became known as the Canons of the Synod of Dort. The only fault I find in this document is that it at places uses language that doesn't condemn the so-called infralapsarian position. The infralapsarian issue was not born naturally, but from the foes of Calvinism who were successful in getting a crack left in Reformed theology by the introduction of this understanding of the divine counsel of God with Himself. The church has never used the supra/infra position as a test of orthodoxy. However I dare say the infra position is not biblical in the fullest understanding of the decree of God and providential working out this decree in history. When the work of Dort is understood in its historical context, it is not an infra document. Dort uses the term "because of sin" which appears to say that the election happened in the counsel of God after God had permitted the fall. Thus the term infra-lapsarian (infra beneath or below - lapsarian lapse or fall) Understand both positions are not in time but the order of how God thought or ordered things in the

appreciate the straight-forward manner in which they reveal this divine truth, I would again caution all in the use of *foreknowledge*, without making sure the proper foundation is in place and the intended audience has the theological aptitude to understand how the foreknowledge of God as used here has absolutely nothing to do with election.⁵ The Westminster Assembly qualifies this usage with the word *free*. In that God was not bound in any way to act in a predetermined way because of His perfect foreknowledge. Any other way and we have left room for the profane to clip away the second petal⁶ of the TULIP, as there can never be any doubt that the election was not “earned” by what the sinner has done or that God foresaw them doing in the future. We also encounter the word *immutable*⁷ here once more. God’s decree being unchangeable binds the fifth petal⁸ to its foundation in Scripture. What God has begun, God cannot but bring to completion.

As we have seen in the treatment of the decree of God in these three questions, the decree is concerned with election. Though all of the creation is listed, and this is not a side issue, man is the height of God’s creation and it is only fitting that the focus of the decree is toward man. Dr. J. B. Green in his *Harmony of the Westminster Standards* chose to group this question with Chapter four of the *Westminster Confession* and questions 14 - 17 of the *Larger Catechism* under creation. As noted, the decree does have application to all of creation and I would caution us not to look at the word of God to try and separate each and every word that can be considered a divine decree from the whole. In speaking of the Decalogue in his short work entitled *The Ten Commandments*, G. Campbell Morgan wrote, “In the close of the Book of Ecclesiastes, the preacher says ‘This is the end of the matter; all have been heard: fear God, and keep His commandments; for this is the whole of man’ “ (Ecc.12:13). Not ‘the whole duty of man,’ as it was in the Authorized Version, but the ‘whole of man.’ That is to say, if a man fears God and keeps His commandments, he is a whole man. Judged by this standard, how many are there that are not whole men?” So it is, we must be careful to not be caught up in the bright light of one portion of the Holy Writ, but give attention to all. “. . . but every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.” was the answer of our Lord when shown such lofty heights designed of hell to entrap the souls of the unwary. So the divine truth prevails and all of the creation is sustained by God’s

eternal counsel. This may seem minor but it will flavor all other understanding of the Bible and have a profound affect on the complete theology of a person. This leaves some wiggle room for Arminianism or the free-will of man to choose God. This was not the intent of Dort and a misuse of their work to make this claim. Nonetheless it is so used by foes of a true Reformed doctrine.

⁵ As explained before, God is timeless, that is God stands outside time as mankind understands it. Thus, all of history is before God from beginning to end at all times. God has always known all things. However, if God used this foreknowledge in anyway to make the election, it is not of grace and the total redemptive history as revealed by God in Scripture is without foundation.

⁶ 2nd Petal = Unconditional Election – that is no condition whatsoever was met by man in election.

⁷ Immutable - Unchanging, meaning that God has not, will not, cannot change. This has a direct connection to what sovereignty means in perfection and any change whatsoever impugns the divinity of God. Thus it is not limiting God to say God cannot do this. It is not denying that with God all things are possible. But it is crucial to man if his hope is to be well founded and of any value to him.

⁸ Perseverance of the Saints - This means the elect can never lose their election. It is the gift of God and all of God’s gifts are without shadow or turning.

eternal decree. This is not the same as providence which we shall see in the proper place is the ordering of the decree of election and the resultant secondary causes proceeding therefrom, to bring about God's perfect and holy will.

“. . . counsel of His own will” surely none would dare to consider any but the Godhead Itself capable of holding counsel with God to bring about change to that which is perfection itself. As I watch the world rave about itself, and man once more dream of building its modern towers of Babble, daring to profane the Word of God in declaring it to condone evil, and permit perversion of the species I cannot but remember the story of Job. Surely if any ever had cause to seek direct counsel with God, it was Job. Yet throughout we see Job declare God sovereign, and God never condescend to explain His actions. God speaks of paths in the sea, and the feeding and care of various wild life, but never explains Himself. God is sovereign! God has spoken, His voice is an eternal edict to which all of creation must bow in obedience. What comfort then are the words of Paul “. . . all things work for good to those who love God, who are called according to His purpose” (Rom.8:28). If God's every word is less than the eternal truth, these too are but empty and vain words. Thus our beloved faith so vividly and soundly proclaimed in the TULIP⁹ stands continuously before the throne of God, safe from all attacks. Yet, along with the reformers, Dort and the Westminster Divines let us not detract from the beauty of the decree as it applies to angels and men, brought to fruit in the work of creation and continuing in providence. (Providence will be dealt with separately and at length.)

⁹ The Reformed TULIP is not from Calvin as many seem to think. If the whole truth be known it isn't as much Calvin as Zwingli. Calvin was much more conscious of divisions within the body of Christ and was more tolerant than Zwingli. Zwingliism is a more strict and legalistic approach which we see in the Westminster standards. Dort was more Calvinistic then in this sense. However these five petals of the TULIP are the five classic tenets of a biblical faith that leads to the proper understanding and application of the Bible. What we must understand here is that this is a narrow line through the middle of Biblical theology. To deviate far in either direction is error. To the right we fall in legalism and a me-onlism, wearing a badge of faith that excludes all who do not toe the exact same line. To move to the left leads to universalism that makes a mockery of the blood of Jesus Christ.

Suggested Sermon Outline

The Holy Catholic Church

What do you believe concerning the HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH?

I believe that, from the beginning to the end of the world, and from among the whole human race, the Son of God, by His Spirit and His Word, gathers, protects, and preserves for Himself, in the unity of the true faith, a congregation chosen for eternal life. Moreover, I believe that I am and forever will remain a living member of it.

What do you understand by the COMMUNION OF THE SAINTS?

First, that believers one and all, as partakers of the Lord Christ, and all His treasures and gifts, shall share in one fellowship. Second, that each one ought to know that he is obliged to use his gifts freely and with joy for the benefit and welfare of other members.

What do you believe concerning the FORGIVENESS OF SINS?

That, for the sake of Christ's reconciling work, God will no more remember my sins or the sinfulness with which I have to struggle all my life long; but that He graciously imparts to me the righteousness of Christ so that I may never come into condemnation.

I. Christ Gathers a People to Himself

A. The promise of a great world church was part of the revelation to Abraham. Sojourn in this land, and I will be with thee, and will bless thee; for unto thee, and unto thy seed, I will give all these countries, and I will perform the oath which I swore unto Abraham thy father; And I will make thy seed to multiply as the stars of heaven, and will give unto thy seed all these countries; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; (GENESIS 26:3-4)

B. The gathering of the promised people from among all nations is the work of Christ. And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; (REVELATION 5:9)

C. Christ, not some organizational official, is the head of the promised holy people. And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence. (COLOSSIANS 1:18)

D. The Bible is the instrument of God's administration in the church.

As for me, this is my covenant with them, saith the LORD; My spirit that is upon thee, and my words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed's seed, saith the LORD, from henceforth and for ever. (ISAIAH 59:21)

E. The world is headed into the Holy Catholic Church. For so hath the Lord commanded us, saying, I have set thee to be a light of the Gentiles, that thou shouldest be for salvation unto the ends of the earth. And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad, and glorified the word of the Lord: and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed. (ACTS 13:47-48)

F. There is only one genuine Church by definition. Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. (EPHESIANS 4:3-6)

G. The is the product of Christ's work. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. (EPHESIANS 5:25-27)

H. No one can prevent Christ from accomplishing His intention for the church. And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. (JOHN 10:28)

II. The Gathered Are One Community

A. Christ made only one kind of believer and gathered only one church. God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 CORINTHIANS 1:9)

B. The great differences in believers and organizations still fit into a single church. Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal. (1 CORINTHIANS 12:4-7)

C. As there is only one way of salvation there is only one church. For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. (1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-13)

III. The Church Is the Community of Forgiveness

A. Through the work of Christ, people come back to a right relationship with God and then help others to return to God. To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. (2 CORINTHIANS 5:19)

B. People actually can be right with God. For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him. (2 CORINTHIANS 5:21)

C. God does not continually drag up the past to make us endure again what was wrong. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. (JEREMIAH 31:34)

D. The church of God is the community of new hope. There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death. (ROMANS 8:1-2)

Consider: For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. (John 3:17-18 AV)