

Studies in the Westminster Confession of Faith

Newtownabbey Free Presbyterian Church Rev Brian McClung 20th November 2013 Chapter 3 Part 7
Romans 9:11-24

Chapter 3 - Of God's Eternal Decree

Section VII. The rest of mankind God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of His own will, whereby He extendeth or withholdeth mercy, as He pleaseth, for the glory of His sovereign power over His creatures, to pass by; and to ordain them to dishonour and wrath, for their sin, to the praise of His glorious justice. Proof Texts: *Matthew 11:25,26; Romans 9:17,18,21,22; 2 Timothy 2:19,20; Jude ver. 4; 1 Peter 2:8.*

Section seven of this third chapter of the Confession of Faith teaches the following three propositions:

1. As God has sovereignly decreed to save some, He has also sovereignly decreed to pass over others.
2. God has determined to deal with those whom He has passed over according as their sins justly deserved.
3. These actions of God are to the praise of His justice.

This section of the Confession deals with what is commonly known as the '*Decree of Reprobation*' or even '*Double Reprobation*'. Our Confession is very careful in its terminology and explanation of this truth. This section guards against two errors:

1. There are some who use the term '*Double Predestination*' to suggest that both aspects of Predestination are to be viewed in exactly the same way. They view these two aspects solely as the twin discretionary acts of a sovereign God. This view takes no account of anything but God's good pleasure. There are some who seem to take pleasure in God's condemnation and damnation of sinners. They speak disparagingly of the 'Reprobate' and at length about Reprobation. It is wrong to take this narrow view as we will come to see.

It is also important to remember when coming to deal with this topic what is taught in the Scriptures about God's decree of reprobation: *For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord GOD: wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye, Ezekiel 18:32; Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel? Ezekiel 33:11.* Let us never give the opposite impression!

2. There are those who would deny altogether the doctrine of Reprobation. As with the doctrine of election Arminians are set against any thought of God passing over sinners and withholding His mercy. There are also others, who would not class themselves as Arminians, who would also be against the thought of reprobation. For example, The Banner of Truth in republishing Arthur Pink's book on The Sovereignty of God removed the original fifth chapter on 'Reprobation' from the new publication. As Rev Robert Shaw points out in his exposition of the Confession: *Some who allow of personal and eternal election, deny any such thing as reprobation. But the one unavoidably follows from the other; for the choice of some must necessarily imply the rejection of others.* Rev John Dick said in his Lectures on Theology: *Election and rejection are co-relative terms; and men impose upon themselves, and imagine that they conceive what it is impossible to conceive, when they admit election and deny reprobation....*

1. As God has sovereignly decreed to save some, He has also sovereignly decreed to pass over others.

This is the first part of the Decree of Reprobation. It is sometimes called: '*Preterition*', which comes from a Latin verb which means '*to pass or to go by*'. God sovereignly passes over some in the decree of election. They are not elected to salvation. Those passed over are no worse than those elected.

We read in the Scriptures, *Rev 13:8; 17:8*, of some *whose names are not written in the book of life*, and who, consequently, are opposed to those whose names are written, in the Book of Life. We read of those who are *vessels of wrath fitted to destruction*; who *were before of old ordained to condemnation*; who *stumble at the Word, being disobedient, whereunto also they were appointed*; of individuals whom God is said to '*hate*', while others He '*loves*'. Rev John Dick said in his Lectures on Theology: *Let any man carefully and dispassionately read the 9th and the 11th chapters of the Epistle to the Romans, and he will entertain no more doubt that some are ordained to death, than that others are ordained to life.*

2. God has determined to deal with those whom He has passed over according as their sins justly deserved. This is the second element of reprobation and a very important one. Sinners are sent to hell because

of their sins. God determines to deal with some sinners as they deserve, on the principles of strict justice. In sending sinners to hell God is here dealing with sinners on a purely judicial basis. God had determined to deal with the non-elect as their sins deserve.

As emphasised in the wording of the Confession it is their sins and nothing else that has brought God's wrath down upon them. In this act of condemnation God appears as the Judge of all the earth, fixing beforehand the punishment of the guilty; and His decree is therefore only a purpose of acting towards them according to the natural course of justice. Their own sin is the procuring cause of their final ruin, and therefore God does them no wrong.

Pharaoh is given as an example in *Romans ch 9*. A closer look at this man illustrates the distinction that is to be made. The hardening of Pharaoh is first attributed to Pharaoh himself, *Exodus 5:2*. Next it is attributed to his own heart, cf. *Exodus 7:2; 8:15,32; 9:7,34,35*. Finally it is attributed to God, cf. *Exodus 7:3; 9:12; 10:1,20,27; 14:4,8*. At first Pharaoh was not impressed and he refused to let Israel go. Then by an effort of his will he determined to refuse to yield to the command of God. After doing this God smote his heart with judicial blindness and left it to its natural tendency where it was steadfastly set against God and His people and judgment loomed.

3. These actions of God are to the praise of His justice. The salvation of the elect is wholly *to the praise of his glorious grace*, and the condemnation of the non-elect is also *to the praise of his glorious justice*. In Election God will have *mercy on whom he will have mercy*, and in Reprobation *whom he will he hardeneth*, *Romans 9:18*. Remember that God can do with His own as He pleases, *Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good? Matt 20:15*. As John Calvin pointed out, God owes no man anything and no man can justly argue against the righteousness of God in passing by in election, so leaving him to his own sinful self condemnation.

As the rest of this section of *Romans 9* goes on to teach that no one can find fault with God: *Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will? Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour? What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory, Romans 9:19-23.*

God here asserts His sovereign and righteous prerogative to do as He pleases with His creatures. He has sovereign right to act as He did with the angels that sinned: *And the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, he hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day, Jude v6*. He has sovereign right to act as He does with humanity, electing some and passing over others.

Section VIII. The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care, that men attending the will of God revealed in His Word, and yielding obedience thereunto, may, from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election. 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. Proof Texts: *Romans 9:20; Romans 11:33; Deuteronomy 29:29; 2 Peter 1:10, Ephesians 1:6; Rom. 11:5,6,20; 2 Peter 1:10; Romans 8:33; Luke 10:20.*

Great care is to be taken with this doctrine. It is a mystery and it can be misused. Rev Robert Shaw says: *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 [God's] revealed will, that by making sure his vocation, he may ascertain his election.* The revealed will of God is to be our primary business and not the secret will of God, *The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law, Deut 29:29.*

John Calvin said on this truth: *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...Whosoever, 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.*