

"Men treat God's sovereignty as a theme for controversy, but in Scripture it is matter for worship."

J.I. Packer

WCF 3.1-3: God's Decrees
(c.f. Handout #5, "Sovereignty and Suffering")

1. Note that paragraph 1 indicates an *awareness* of the common "objections" to the idea of God's ordaining all things; yet, it also denies that any of the common objections are valid. That is, the Confession affirms *both* God's ordination of all things *and*:

- a. neither is God the author of sin,
- b. nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures;
- c. nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather d. established.

Our difference, then, is that we do not consider the *mystery* involved in this sufficient to cause us to deny either the one or the other. If the Bible affirms both, we confess both, whether they are reconcilable in our minds or not. (last weeks discussion)

2. What is denied in paragraph 2? Compare then to what, specifically, is affirmed in paragraph 3?

See also Calvin, p.925, "we indeed place both doctrines in God, but we say that subjecting one to the other is absurd." p.956, "no distinction between God's will and God's permission."

Scripture references:

Prov. 16:4 The Lord has made everything for its own purpose, Even the wicked for the day of evil.

Rom. 9:22 What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience *vessels of wrath* prepared for destruction?

Rom. 9:23 And He did so in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon *vessels of mercy*, which He prepared beforehand *for glory*,

How does John 3:4ff fit into all this?

Note also:

Mt. 11:25, I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes Father, for such was your gracious will...

Mt. 16:17, Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.

3. What attribute of God is assumed by paragraph 4? Why is this so important to our relationship to God, especially compared to paragraph 5?

4. Notice carefully what all the Confession is and is not saying. On the one hand, this section deals more with the topics of God's attributes in relation to "cosmology" (or the nature of things pertaining to the cosmos or "world") and consistently applies this to topics of salvation. On the other hand, the Confession is not presently dealing with anthropology as within creation, especially as it relates to our free will as described later in Chapter 9 and fallen anthropology as it is discussed in Chapter 6. Therefore, it would be an error to pit this section *against* either "free will" or "human responsibility" Perhaps one way of reconciling these things is to remember that God's decrees, while acting upon time and space, are transcendent to time and space as a created order. Therefore, what God decrees in his transcendent state may very well work through created orders such as free will within time and space such that the created orders are not violated by God's sovereignty, but rather the in complement to God's sovereignty. And then there is the expected mystery!

5. Paragraph 6 indicates that God ordains not only the ends, but also the means. This is established by 1 Pet. 1:1-2: "...who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, that you may obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in fullest measure."

6. Paragraph 7 teaches that God is to be praised for his decrees. The Assembly noted the prayer of thanksgiving offered by Jesus "I praise Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou didst hide these things from the wise and intelligent and didst reveal them to babes" (Mat. 11:25).

Calvin: (p.952)

God's hidden decree is not to be searched out but obediently marveled at... I say with Paul that we ought not to seek any reason for it because in its greatness it far surpasses our understanding... Would he wish God's might so limited as to be unable to accomplish any more than his mind can conceive?

Chapter 5: God's Decrees in Providence

*Providence is the **almighty** and ever present power of God by which he upholds, as with his hand, heaven and earth and all creatures and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty-- all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but from his fatherly hand. (Q.# 27, Heidelberg Catechism)*

1. Relation of "Providence" to "God, the great Creator of all things..." ? (WCF 5.1)

Heb.1:2-3, ...his Son... through whom also he created the world... upholding the universe by his word of power.

Psalms 104, (excerpts) Blessed be the Lord, O my Soul, O Lord you are very great...

You set the earth on its foundations so that it shall never be shaken... you cause the grass to grow for the cattle and plants for people to use... O Lord how manifold are your works, In wisdom you have made them all... Bless the Lord!

2. Note another Reformational absolute: "all." God directs, disposes, and governs "all creatures, actions, and things". In Daniel 4:34-35, these are specified as things both in heaven and on earth.

Reaches to all the creatures of God and all their actions.

Acts 2:23, this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. But God raised him up...

Acts 4:27, ... Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever thy hand and thy plan had predestined to take place...

Acts 17:25-28, "The God who make the world, and everything in it.. he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything. And he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation... He is not far from every one of us; for in him we live, and move, and have our being..."

3. What is the significance of affirming that God's ordering of things causes them to "fall out...either necessarily, freely, or contingently"? Secondary Causes? Providence distinguished from miracles, etc.

As distinguished from "chance" or "fate":

There is no such thing under the divine government, or providence, as real chance or accident... This surely is a most cheering doctrine. What could be more gloomy than to believe that our dearest interests, even life itself, might lie at the mercy of blind or misguided chance? On the contrary, how consoling to know that nothing can befall us, nothing injure us, without the direction or permission of our heavenly Father! (Asbel Green)

4. How do we account for the mystery that God's providence extends to "all...sins of angels and men", while it is also true that God "neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin"?

5. How does the doctrine of God's Providence relate to a practical and daily contentment?

1 Tim. 6:6,8 Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment;... but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these.

2Cor. 12:10 Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

Phil. 4:11 Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have.

Heb. 13:5 Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you."

6. Note in section 5.5-7, the things God often "leaves" his own children to, and the purposes that are behind such "leaving." Is there biblical justifications that God's providence for his church is "special" as for the good of them? (c.f. Mt. 16:18, Mt.28:20, Rom.8:28, Phil.1:6, 1Tim.4:10, Psm.46:1-2, etc)