

THE 1689 BAPTIST CONFESSION OF FAITH

Providence (2)

A. Introduction

1. Two things we are commanded to do as elders are to watch and to hold.

We are to watch what we believe, to make sure we are believing what God's Word says.

"Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers." (1 Timothy 4:16)

We are to hold firmly to the truths taught in God's Word.

"He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it." (Titus 1:9)

It is vital we do these two things, not just for our own sake, but also for the members of this church and in fact those who live in the community God has placed us in.

To help us to watch and to hold, we are spending our elders' meeting working through the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith a paragraph or so at a time.

2. God's Decree, the focus of Chapter 3 in the Confession, is executed in the works of creation (discussed in Chapter 4) and providence, which is the focus of Chapter 5.

"God's works of providence are His most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all His creatures, and all their actions." (Q15 Baptist Catechism)

In the second and third paragraphs of Chapter 5, the Confession discusses how God preserves and governs all His creatures and all their actions.

"Although in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly; so that there is not anything befalls any by chance, or without His providence; yet by the same providence He ordered them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently."

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

B. God ordinarily carries out His decree in providence by using means

1. The reason why anything and everything happens in this world is because of God's foreknowledge and decree.

"Although in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly..."

God is the first cause.

He is working out His perfect plan for His world, which is unchanging (immutable) and without error (infallible).

All things, even the death of His Son, are according to His set purpose and foreknowledge.

"This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross." (Acts 2:23)

This means that nothing which happens in this world is outside of God's knowledge or outside of His decree.

"...so that there is not anything befalls any by chance, or without His providence."

"The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD." (Proverbs 16:33)

2. The way anything and everything happens in this world is ordinarily through the use of means.

"God, in his ordinary providence makes use of means..."

These means are the secondary causes.

"...yet by the same providence He ordered them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently."

These have been planned by God to be the means by which His decree ordinarily come to pass, and because they have, these secondary causes do actually make a difference.

Some of these secondary causes are necessary.

"This is what the LORD says, he who appoints the sun to shine by day, who decrees the moon and stars to shine by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar – the LORD Almighty is his name." (Jeremiah 31:35)

Some of these secondary causes are free.

"For instance, a man may go into the forest with his neighbour to cut wood, and as he swings his axe to fell a tree, the head may fly off and hit his neighbour and kill him. That man may flee to one of these cities and save his life." (Deuteronomy 19:5)

Some of these secondary causes are contingent – dependent upon other causes.

"Micaiah declared, "If you ever return safely, the LORD has not spoken through me." Then he added, "Mark my words, all you people!" (1 Kings 22:28)

It is because God has ordained the end, that the means He has ordained to bring about the end really do make a difference.

C. God occasionally carries out His decree in providence without using means or them ordinarily

1. God is not restricted by the means He ordinarily uses.

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

He is able to perform miracles.

2. He occasionally works without them.

He does not need to use a secondary cause to bring about His desired outcome.

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." (Luke 1:34-35)

3. He occasionally works above them.

He goes above what is a natural or normal way a secondary cause works to bring about His desired outcome.

"Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead – since he was about a hundred years old – and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised." (Romans 4:19-21)

4. He occasionally works against them.

He goes against the designed function of a secondary cause to bring about His desired outcome.

"They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them." (Daniel 3:27)

D. How then shall we lead?

1. We must not presume that God will act without His people using means.

For the lost to be saved without us praying or preaching the gospel.

For the church to become like Christ without us seeking to obey His commands.

For the resource for ministry to be provided without us giving.

2. We must not complain about the fruit we see from our faithful use of means.

Instead we should be content with what God gives to us according to His good pleasure.

"Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Genesis 18:25)