

THE 1689 BAPTIST CONFESSION OF FAITH

Providence (3)

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 providence is the topic under consideration in Chapter 5 of the Confession.

"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)

The first paragraph provides a general summary looking at the scope, nature and goal of God's providence.

In the second and third paragraph, how God preserves and governs all His creatures and all their actions is discussed.

Paragraph 4 is all about how God's providence relates to the reality of sin.

"The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God, so far manifest themselves in His providence, that His determinate counsel extends itself even to the first fall, and all other sinful actions both of angels and men; and that not by a bare permission, which also He most wisely and powerfully binds, and otherwise orders and governs, in a manifold dispensation to His most holy ends; yet so, as the sinfulness of their acts proceeds only from the creatures, and not from God, who, being more holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin."

B. God is absolutely sovereign with regards to sin

1. Sin can only take place because God enables angels and people to sin.

To be able to sin, they need life and the circumstances to, which God provides.

2. Sin can only take place because God permits angels and people to sin.

"The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God, so far manifest themselves in His providence, that His determinate counsel extends itself even to the first fall, and all other sinful actions both of angels and men."

If God is absolutely sovereign, nothing takes place without Him allowing it to, including the rebellion of Satan in heaven and Adam on earth, and every other sin.

But God's permitting of sin is not a bare permission as it is purposed by Him for reasons which are wise and good.

He does not merely permit sinful actions – He decrees that they happen.

"...and that not by a bare permission, which also He most wisely and powerfully binds, and otherwise orders and governs, in a manifold dispensation to His most holy ends."

"Plainly it was God's will that sin should enter this world otherwise it would not have entered, for nothing happens save as God has eternally decreed. Moreover, there was more than a bare permission for God only permits that which He has purposed." (AW Pink)

"For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all. Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?" (Romans 11:32-34)

An example of this was God's permitting of Satan to incite David to sin in order to bring about His purpose of punishing the people of Israel for their wickedness.

"Again the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, "Go and take a census of Israel and Judah." (2 Samuel 24:1)

"Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel." (1 Chronicles 21:1)

God's providential permission of sinful actions is not unrestrained – He places bounds or limits on them that cannot be crossed.

The greatest example of God's providence in regard to sin is the death of His Son on the cross.

"Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen." (Acts 4:27-28)

3. Yet in all this, God is not tainted by sin in any way.

"...yet so, as the sinfulness of their acts proceeds only from the creatures, and not from God, who, being more holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin."

C. God is absolutely holy with regards to sin

1. Though God enables and permits and purposes for angels and people to sin, they alone are held responsible for it.

"For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world." (1 John 2:16)

2. How can God be totally holy and innocent in relation to sin if this is true?

The Bible does not tell us how, but what it does do is affirm things that are true with both precision and clarity.

The things that God provides for sinners which enables them to sin are not evil in themselves. It is the sinner who uses these things in a sinful way, not God.

God's purposes in sinful acts are always good and holy, whereas the purposes of humans in those same acts are not.

God is not and never will be the author of sin, nor does He approve of sin.

"When tempted, no-one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death." (James 1:13-15)

D. How then shall we lead?

1. We must take care in how we speak of how God's providence relates to our sin.

He is both absolutely sovereign and absolutely holy.

It is important to keep these truths in tension because a failure to do this will inevitably lead to error.

We must model and teach the church to live with this mystery.

2. We can trust that God can bring out of human sinfulness what is good.

"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." (Genesis 50:20)

When sin enters into the life of the church God was not surprised, and He can use it to bring about His purposes that are always holy and righteous.

This is not a reason to take sin lightly, but it should reassure us that sin cannot stop God's Will for this church from being done.