

Westminster Confession of Faith – The Difficult Paragraphs

A Brief Explanation of the Difficult Paragraphs of WCF 3.2, 3.3, And 3.4 – God's Eternal Decrees

WCF 3.2

Although God knows whatever may or can happen under all possible circumstances, he has not ordered anything because he foresaw it in the future as something which would happen under such circumstances.

This paragraph refers to the fact that God knew before it was ordained, not that He saw before and thus He ordained it. He is utterly in control of all that happens, whether it is directly caused and ordered by Him, or if it is the result of the actions of others - what our theological stance calls secondary causes.

WCF 3.3 (the paragraph that causes many trouble)

*In order to manifest his glory God has ordered that some men and angels should be **predestined** to everlasting life and that others should be **foreordained** to everlasting death.*

Notice in this paragraph that the writers of the Confession used two different words in relation to the doctrine of election - one referring to life and the other to death. These men were very precise in their wording and weren't letting themselves be bound by literary rules or conventions that would say they shouldn't duplicate words. There are two words because they mean two different things. The way we read and interpret this paragraph is that the **predestination** to life is indeed actively ordered and decreed by God in order to fulfill His purpose for His kingdom and for His glory out of His love for His creation. The **foreordination** unto death is the result of God's passive action (not inaction) in the lives of everyone else - however it still is lovingly done so for the purpose of His kingdom and His glory. How foreordination to everlasting death is loving is difficult to see at a first glance, but God is offering those who don't want to yield to Him exactly what they want - separation from Him. They just don't know what that costs. Whether we come to faith or if we reject faith is an act of our will - we get what we want - but the only way we can desire to come to faith is through the initiating action of the Holy Spirit (by the Spirit Jesus is the founder and perfecter of our faith), applying grace to our hearts which were dead in our trespasses and sins, making us alive to see our need of a Savior, and by His kindness bringing us to repentance. This is a very difficult and mysterious doctrine, which subject is addressed in paragraph 8 (see below) of chapter 3. It has been said that if paragraph 8 was paragraph 1, many of the questions and difficulties people have with chapter 3 would be eliminated.

WCF 3.4

This predestination and foreordination of angels and men are precise and unchangeable. The number and identity of angels and men in each group are certain, definite, and unalterable.

This paragraph refers to God's absolute sovereignty in all things. He has left nothing to chance in His decrees. He is not fretting and wringing His hands in heaven, wondering whether or not someone will respond to the gospel. Again, this is difficult, and can seem that it is a doctrine that excludes people, but the reality is that we are all excluded from redemption (*remember, we are born sinners, not neutral until we commit a sin*) until the Holy Spirit applies grace to our hearts "at just the right time" and includes us in God's kingdom. This is the only way we can be assured of our salvation, and our security in that salvation. We are not saved by grace only to have to work to stay in His grace. Since it is God who does the saving by grace, because of His eternal decree, not being dependent on our decisions or performance, we have the guarantee through the presence of the Holy Spirit whom God freely gives to us to live in us.

WCF 3.8, (which hopefully clarifies and assuages this difficult subject – notice that it speaks of the doctrine of predestination and is silent [*passive?*] on the doctrine of foreordination)

*This important and mysterious **doctrine of predestination must be treated with special discretion and care**, so that, paying attention to and obeying the will of God revealed in his word, men may be assured that they have been eternally chosen from the certainty of their effectual calling. In this way the **doctrine of predestination** will elicit not only our praise, reverence, and admiration for God, but also a humble and diligent life, fully supporting everyone who sincerely obeys the gospel.*