

**Excursions in Historical Theology:  
Theological Foundations of the Westminster Confession of Faith  
Compiled by Steve Paulus**

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 What is historical theology?**

*Historical theology* is the study of the development of doctrines regarding the primary beliefs and teachings of followers of Jesus Christ throughout the history of the church. Historical theology is rooted in the teachings of the Bible, but explores how the church has interpreted Scripture throughout its history. In addition to Scripture interpretation, historical theology takes into account the various controversies which have shaped the church's beliefs and practices. Historical theology also includes an examination of the non-scriptural traditions of the church.

All theology is rooted in *biblical theology*, which is the discipline of taking the sum of the teachings of the Bible on a given subject and stating the teaching of scripture in that area. The study of biblical theology leads to *systematic theology*, which organizes biblical doctrine into a number of accepted categories which include, but are not limited to, the Doctrine of God, Revelation, Man (Anthropology), Salvation/Redemption (Soteriology), Spirit Beings/World (Pneumatology), the Nature and Government of the Church (Ecclesiology), and Last Things (Eschatology) among others. All good theology is rooted in the Scripture.

The first of the church fathers to establish systematic theology as a disciplined study were Clement (d. 215) and Origen (d.254) both of the catechetical school of Alexandria in Egypt. The Church at Alexandria was one of the leading churches of the patristic era. Alexandria (named for Alexander the Great) was a center of learning in the Hellenistic world, home to one of the world's first and greatest libraries established under Ptolemy Philadelphus (2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.). The Egyptian church established a school there and both Clement and Origen were headmasters. Origen, in particular, established the science of theology whereby biblical knowledge was organized into specialized categories.

Biblical theology is the study of the general sweep of what the Bible says about a given category of belief. Biblical theology is sometimes divided into Old Testament or New Testament theology, focusing primarily on what each testament teaches about the various categories of theology. Historical theology on the other hand is the study of the development of doctrine within the life and history of the church. Doctrines such as the Trinity, the Atonement, schemes of the millenium and Second Coming, the sacraments, while based in scripture, were refined in the church's thinking through crisis and controversy. Speaking of the church in the patristic era J.N.D. Kelly writes, "Conditions were favorable to a wide variety of opinions even on subjects of primary importance." (J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, p.4).

The purpose of our study is to engage in an exploration of historical theology. This exercise will automatically lead to a deeper understanding of both systematic and biblical theology. Think of the course as an excursion. We will have a “home port,” the Westminster Confession of Faith. This has been among the most influential confessions in church history affecting all churches and denominations, which call themselves Reformed. It was the result of the Westminster Assembly first appointed in 1643 by the Long Parliament in London. The Confession was approved in 1648 during the time of thoroughgoing Protestant reform in Britain after the death of Charles I and before the accession of Charles II. The Confession has become the standard of Reformed Presbyterianism in the English speaking world.

But the Westminster Confession is just our home base. We will use the categories addressed by the Confession as a launching place for exploring developments in theology. Like any excursion we’ll have to be satisfied with sampling the various stops along the way, as the developments in historical theology are far too numerous and involved to explore any of them thoroughly and do them justice in a course of this length.

Think of this course as if it were a Caribbean cruise. Even the most extensive trip just begins to uncover the treasures of the region. So it will be with our excursion into historical theology. Perhaps it will create a hunger to return to the area repeatedly to further explore the territory.

This will be an *inductive* study of theology and church history. That is, we will look at particular issues and events and arrive at general conclusions. We will allow our excursion to lead us where it will without regard to deductive methods. We’re going to ramble through the field of theology. In this context, I would describe the inductive method as follows. While the Westminster Confession of faith is itself an orderly statement of the Reformed Christian faith, it is at the same time influenced by multiple currents from centuries of theological disputation and controversy. These currents form a jumble of tangled threads. We will unravel each thread, one by one and follow it out where it leads until all the threads are untangled. By God’s grace, this will not be too ambitious a goal.

## **1.2 The Rule of Faith**

One of the earliest developments defining the belief system of the church was provoked by sub-Christian and anti-Christian heresies and practices. The early Christian apologist Irenaeus (d. 200) established a rule (*kanon*) or means by which all beliefs (doctrines) were to be judged. This Rule of Faith had three elements: 1) Was it biblical, and did it adhere to the doctrines of the baptismal formula (Apostles' Creed)? 2) Was it believed always, everywhere by everyone? And 3) In cases of dispute, did the churches founded by the apostles endorse it, the church at Rome having greatest authority?

It was this belief that leads to the terms “One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic” that we hear in the early creeds. While this system protected the patristic church from the many heresies that were swirling in the first three centuries, it created a fatal flaw (according to

Protestants) in the system. This flaw was that tradition (the beliefs and practices of the churches) was eventually placed on a par with scripture, so that Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches have tended to give equal place to scripture and tradition in their doctrinal formulations. This will become a primary bone of contention over a thousand years later at the time of the Reformation, and is very much a current found in the Westminster Confession.

### **1.3 What is a Confession of faith?**

Confessions (from Latin, “to say together”), also sometimes referred to as creeds (Latin, *credo*, “I believe”), are simply succinct statements of the faith of a given community. Catholics, Baptists, Lutherans, Presbyterians all have confessions that they adhere to. Some confessions are embraced by numerous groups. For instance, Anglicans (Episcopalians) adhere to the Thirty-Nine Articles (1563) as well as the Nicene Creed (A.D. 381) which the Orthodox and Catholic Churches also believe. In fact, most Protestants embrace the tenants of the Nicene Creed and other early confessions, but Catholics and Orthodox don’t embrace Protestant confessions, generally.

Some of the more well-known confessions include the Augsburg Confession, First and Second Helvetic Confessions, the Belgic Confession, the Scottish Confession of Faith, the Barmen Declaration among others. The Westminster Confession of Faith, the starting point of our study is a foundational document of the Puritan/Reformed movement in England. The Westminster Confession was drawn up by leading ministers of Great Britain at Westminster Cathedral in 1644 during the Cromwellian period of the British political and religious reformations. This confession has been the basis of many Reformed bodies including several Presbyterian Churches, and is considered a mature statement of Reformation doctrine.

Some of the major figures of the Reformation are Martin Luther, John Calvin and Menno Simons – all active in the early to mid-sixteenth century. So the Westminster Confession was drawn up a full 100 years after the initial impact of the Reformation of the Church. Luther, the German reformer, was the first successful reformer, though numerous attempts at reform of the doctrine, polity, and practices of the Catholic Church in Western Europe had been attempted prior to him, notably John Wycliff and John Hus in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. Calvin, a bit junior to Luther lived and worked in Geneva and published the immensely influential *Institutes of the Christian Religion* which had a major influence on all Reformed national churches subsequent to its publication. Menno Simons was a primary leader among the Anabaptists, the most persecuted and disestablished wing of the Reformation. They were rejected both by Catholics and Protestant Reformed bodies and are the forerunners of present-day Mennonites and Baptists. Each have their particular doctrinal emphases which we will discuss in time.

It may surprise you, but even Staunton Grace Covenant Church has a statement of faith or confession. We base our beliefs on the Bible, the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed.

### Discussion Questions

1. What is the value of a confession of faith?
2. Do Protestants adhere to the rule of faith in some way?
3. What is the down side of using a confession of faith?
4. What's the difference between a creed, a confession of faith, and a catechism?

### Readings for Chapter One:

Time Line

Ireneus and Tertullian, Rule of Faith

Apostle's Creed, Nicene Creed

Luther on Liberation from Human Authority

Thirty-Nine Articles

Introduction to the Westminster Confession

Barmen Declaration

### Glossary:

**Anabaptist:** Named used to refer to those who refused to have their infants baptized, introduced believers, baptism and re-baptized professing adults who had been baptized as children

**Biblical Theology:** A systematic study of various doctrines based solely on the teachings of scripture in a given area of doctrine.

**Catechism:** A method or system of teaching adherents and converts to the faith its rudimentary doctrines.

**Confession of Faith:** A brief but comprehensive, systematic statement of the beliefs of a given faith community in relation to the primary doctrines of the faith.

**Creed:** The most succinct form of a statement of beliefs.

**Historical Theology:** The study of the development of the doctrines of the church in the context of the conflicts and controversies of church history.

**Lutheran:** The Church which embraced the reformation practices initiated by Martin Luther in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century.

**Reformed:** Generally those churches which embraced the reformation practices endorsed by John Calvin as expressed in *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

**Reformation:** Refers to an era, an event, and an ongoing phenomenon. In essence, it refers to the re-forming of the medieval Catholic Church in the areas of doctrine and polity.

**Systematic Theology:** The study of belief and teaching about God based on established categories of thought and doctrine (teaching). Systematic theology is based primarily on biblical theology.

**Theology:** The study of doctrine and teaching relating to God, particularly the teachings of the Christian faith.

**Westminster Confession of Faith:** Confession of faith drawn up by the Westminster Assembly in 1644 and after, and used as the basis of Reformed doctrine in the English speaking world.

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## 2. How does God Reveal Himself? (Westminster Confession, Chapter One)

### 2.1. Description of Chapter I

The Holy Scriptures are the subject of Chapter I. There are ten paragraphs or articles under this first heading. These articles address the necessity of the teaching of Scriptures for an understanding of salvation, a list of the books contained in Scripture, a statement on the Apocrypha, and a declaration on the inspiration and authority of Scripture.

This first chapter of the Westminster Confession addresses numerous issues of theological importance and reflects an attempt to resolve ongoing theological controversies. These include 1) general vs. special revelation, 2) inspiration and revelation, 3) the canon of scripture, 4) the limits of revelation, and 5) the authority of scripture as the final arbiter of the faith.

### 2.2 General vs. Special Revelation

The Bible clearly teaches that God is revealed in His creation through two primary means: the creation itself, and specifically in mankind who was made in His image and likeness.<sup>1</sup> Numerous scriptures speak of God's revelation in nature generally, that is, *general revelation* (Ps. 19:1-5; Acts 14:15-17; Rom. 1:19-20ff.). Mankind carries the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27). In Romans 2:14-15 the conscience seems to be the seat of the image of God in man. As is clear from the Romans 1 passage, general revelation is not in itself sufficient to bring a person to salvation. In fact, it seems only to add to the condemnation of the unrepentant sinner; i.e. they *should* have known better. Scripture makes it clear that despite the advantage of general revelation we all have sinned (Rom. 3:10-19,23; Ps. 51:5, and others) and points to the existence of indwelling or original sin (Rom. 5:12-14; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 2:1-3).

C.S. Lewis addresses the universality of the internal moral law in *Mere Christianity*:

These, then are the two points I wanted to make. First, that human beings all over the earth, have this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way, and cannot really get rid of it. Secondly, that they do not, in fact, behave that way. They know the Law of Nature; they break it. These two facts are the foundation of all clear thinking about ourselves and the universe we live in. (C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1943, p. 21).

So, while general revelation shows the true nature of God, it is not sufficient to bring us salvation. Therefore the *Confession* states in Chapter I: "Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and

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<sup>1</sup> J. Rodman Williams in *Renewal Theology* (p. 34) sees a third source of general revelation in history itself. He also explores the concept of natural theology, an ability to recognize God's nature without aid of special revelation.

power of God as to leave men inexcusable; yet they are not sufficient to give the knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation.”

*Special revelation* is another means by which God makes himself known. In fact, since general revelation is inadequate to save, special revelation is necessary for a knowledge of salvation. Thus the *Confession*, “Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in diverse manner, to reveal Himself, and to declare that His will unto the Church . . .” Special revelation is made up of communications from God which are supernatural in character. Dreams, visions, prophecy, signs, wonders, miracles are all examples of special revelation. In addition to these, the New Testament bears witness to two forms of special revelation of unique significance, 1) the person of Jesus Christ, and 2) the Word of God itself (Heb.1:1-3; II Peter 1:19ff.). The Westminster Confession gives a special place to Scripture itself as the means of salvation. “(A)nd afterwards for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing: which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary.”

### **2.3 Revelation and Inspiration**

*Revelation* is the activity of God whereby He makes Himself known. It is a personal self-disclosure. In the special revelation which we call the Bible, God’s self-disclosure is verbal, it is progressive (from Old Testament to New Testament, clarifying, illuminating, emphasizing), it was given through various means – sometimes through visions, dreams, prophetic utterances, and at other times through more “ordinary” means such as research, observation of natural events, recording of history, and the careful composition of poetry or songs. God’s verbal self-revelation is accomplished through human agency, not obliterating or by-passing human personality or limitation, but making full use of these characteristic human traits. Thus, language, cultural setting, and historical circumstances play a role in inscription of the verbal revelation. Thus, understanding such factors is significant in obtaining a clear understanding of the meaning of God’s self-revelation.

The revelation which resulted in the Old and New Testament Scriptures may be described as incarnational. That is, God’s infallible Spirit worked in a unique fashion through fallible human instrumentality. Therefore the Scriptures are all the more unique and amazing as a self-expression of God to His creation.

*Inspiration* is “the supernatural influence of God’s Spirit upon the biblical authors which insured that what they wrote was precisely what God intended them to write for the communication of His truth” (J.I. Packer “Revelation and Inspiration,” in *Eerdmans Bible Commentary*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970, p. 17). The biblical Greek word for inspiration is *theopneustos* or God-breathed, as in “All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching . . .” (II Tim. 3:16). Any view of verbal inspiration which fails to take into account the use of human instrumentality is inadequate. The “gnostic” view of revelation – whereby God by-passes “tainted flesh” through the violation of the scribe’s personality or faculties is suitable for a sub- or non- Christian

view of inspiration. Such a view may characterize the Muslim view of the composition of the Koran, for instance, which was given to Mohammed in a trance-like state.

## **2.4 The Canon of Scripture**

Section 2 of Chapter I of the *Confession* is a list of the books contained in Holy Scripture, that is, the Word of God. These form what are known as the *canon* of Scripture. Canon comes from a Greek word (*kanon*) meaning rod, rule (as in ruler), standard, or list. In this context it is a standardized list of books received as uniquely inspired special revelation whereby God has communicated His will concerning the salvation of mankind. The Old Testament canon is composed of 39 books. The Hebrew Bible contains the same books but they number 22. This is because some of the books are listed singly such as I and II Samuel, I and II Kings and others.

Catholic and Orthodox Bibles include an additional 14 books in the Old Testament which are referred to as “apocryphal” which means hidden. As article 3 of Chapter I shows, the *Confession* does not approve of the use of these books in public worship. Church fathers such as Athanasius and Jerome afforded these books a secondary or “deutero-canonical” status. Thus they continue to be used regularly in Catholic worship services.

The reason these books appeared in the first place is that they are included in the *Septuagint*, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (c. 250 B.C.). They are not found in any original Hebrew manuscripts, but were used in the Greek-speaking world before the time of Christ.

Eusebius, the fourth century church historian, records the various deliberations involved in establishing the New Testament canon of scripture. While the books were accepted very early, many other books popularly circulated had to be “weeded out” before the list was finalized. F.F. Bruce in *The Canon of Scripture* details the process by which Old and New Testaments were finally verified by the believing community. The definitive final list of the New Testament canon was published in a festal letter of Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria in 367 A.D.

## **2.5 The limits of revelation.**

“Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in diverse manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto the church . . . . Those former ways of God’s revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.” The *Westminster Confession* and many Reformed believers subscribe to the cessation theory, or the belief that God has ceased to use any means of special revelation other than Christ as revealed in Scripture. Supernatural revelations of the Holy Spirit and the gifts tend to be downplayed or even rejected. This phrase from the *Confession* gives voice to that view.

## 2.6 The authority of scripture.

Several statements in the *Westminster Confession* assign ultimate authority to the Scriptures as the final arbiter of the faith. This is in accord with the Reformation doctrine of *sola scriptura*, meaning our faith is based not on the traditions of the church, but scripture. This is a repudiation of the Rule of Faith which gives place to tradition as a source of truth, and therefore of our faith. Scripture is “the Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined.....” (Chapter I, Article 10).

“Decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits are to be examined . . .” in light of the Word of God. In this statement we see the Reformed willingness to entertain the possibility of the value of earlier documents, but refusing to acknowledge any final authority other than Scripture.

## 2.7 Distinctions between Catholicism and Protestantism

As we have seen, Catholicism bases its beliefs on the double foundation of Scripture and tradition rooted in the Rule of Faith as propounded by Irenaeus. Protestantism makes a radical break with this system by declaring the basis of the Reformation of the Church to be *sola fides*, *sola gratia*, and *sola scriptura*. Thus, faith not works, grace, not merit, and the Bible, not tradition, are the sources and mainstays of the right practice of the Christian faith and Church according to Protestants. Another commonly recognized difference between Catholic and Protestant doctrine is the concept of the priesthood of all believers. This belief denies the concept that ordination, or the sacrament of Holy Orders, imparts a special indelible character on the minister (priest) which qualifies him to celebrate the Eucharist, forgive sins, and represent Christ mediatorially to the people and the people to God.

Does this mean that the Reformers rejected completely the teachings and example of those church leaders, theologians, and authors who preceded them? By no means. Calvin, in the *Institutes* quotes copiously from the church fathers and uses their statements to bolster his arguments in behalf of the Reformation. Likewise Luther, though less abundantly. The Reformers desired to *reform* the church not fracture it, and to maintain continuity with genuine believers from each previous generation. Their level of success is a matter of debate. Most would say they failed in this sense.

Do Protestants embrace a tradition? Decidedly. The Westminster Confession, or Calvin’s *Institutes* (or the Methodist Book of Discipline, or Anabaptist adherence to Menno Simons’ tenants of non-violence) are good examples of Protestant tradition. Theoretically, though, these sources of tradition are either directly based on Scripture or can be challenged by it.

What’s the value of studying historical theology, or documents such as the Westminster Confession, which seem to simply establish a Protestant tradition? An excellent question which points out the plus and minus of our venture. It seems to be human nature to form new traditions to replace the old ones which were removed in order to do away with

traditions! On the other hand, each generation in its fight against heresy and apostasy attempts to re-state its clearest understanding of the faith and biblical doctrine. These confessions, creeds, and catechisms are the fruit of the intense struggles of the faithful in each generation and stand as a testimony to each generation's understanding of the proper interpretation of the Word of God. The Westminster Confession (1644) and the Nicene Creed (381) are considered to be outstanding and enduring examples of the Church's best theological thought. Because they are believed to be biblically based, a departure from these tends to be seen as a warning about the accuracy of a doctrine, practice, or belief system.

At the outset, let me say, this study is valuable to the extent that it helps us understand the proper interpretation of the message of Scripture to us today, and helps us relate to the best understanding of the church on these matters in each era.

## **2.8 The Translation Maze**

The original biblical manuscripts were written in Hebrew, Aramaic (a close cousin to Hebrew) or Greek. Of course there was generally one original which had to be hand-copied repeatedly in order to preserve the text. An art and science of scribal reproduction arose early in the process of biblical preservation. One group who preserved the Hebrew OT text was known as the *Masorettes*. They preserved the oral tradition of the correct pronunciation (vowels and various diacritical marks) and established a sophisticated system for assuring the accuracy of copies of the OT text. Greek, Latin and other texts were preserved through the work of the *scriptoriums* in medieval monasteries.

In order for the Bible to be understood in one's native tongue, it must be translated. The science of translation has produced varied results over the years, and, of course, there are many languages to translate the Bible into. As noted, one of the earliest translations of the Hebrew Bible into Greek was known as the *Septuagint*. There were numerous other Greek translations by the time of Christ as well.

The first parallel Bible was compiled by Origen of Alexandria in the early third century. His *Hexapla* was a side by side comparison of Hebrew and Greek texts with as many as six to eight parallel columns in places. There were also many Old and New Testament texts translated during this period into Latin, the language of the Romans. The most famous of these is the *Vulgate* (for common language) of Jerome begun around 390 A.D. The Vulgate became the standard translation in Western Europe for over a thousand years. There were other translations as well, and they had tremendous effect on the societies and cultures to which they came. It was no accident that the first book published after the invention of the printing press was the famous German language Gutenberg Bible. Many credit wide distribution of the Bible and Christian literature through this technology with sparking the Reformation.

In English, William Tyndale did a great deal of translation work which was eventually incorporated into the King James Bible of 1611 (nearly 60 years after the Westminster

Assembly). This was the standard Bible translation for many English speakers well into the twentieth century.

Bible translation is an art as much as it is a science. Today we have access to many English language translations of the Bible – some good, others not so good. It may help to run through a few principles of translation to help you know what kind of Bible you are using.

A translation is known as a *version*. This simply means that it is not the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, and that some choices have been made in the process of translation. Several terms may be helpful: a *literal* translation keeps “as close as possible to the exact words and phrasing in the original language, yet still make sense in the receptor language” (Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1982, p. 35). The King James Version or the New American Standard Version are good examples of a literal translation. A *dynamic equivalent* is “(t)he attempt to translate words, idioms, and grammatical constructions of the original language into precise equivalents in the receptor language” (Fee and Stuart, p. 35). The New International Version is a good example of a dynamic equivalent translation. A *free* translation or paraphrase translates “the *ideas* from one language to another, with less concern about using the exact words and phrasing in the original language” (Fee and Stuart, p. 35). The Living Bible or The Message are examples of paraphrases.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. What makes inspiration of the Bible unique from, say, the inspiration of “Gone with the Wind”? or E.M. Bounds’ “On Prayer,” or the movie “The Passion”?
2. Can you meet God through the beauty of nature in the woods on a hike, or out on the golf course? Should I skip church for this? Why or why not?
3. How much authority should I give to my church’s traditions?

### **Readings for Chapter Two:**

Chicago Statement on Inerrancy  
Eusebius on the Apocrypha  
Bruce on Apocrypha and Canon  
Archer on OT Canon

### **Glossary**

**Apocrypha:** A list of fourteen books found in the Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint. They are not found in the Hebrew manuscripts and are not considered on the same level as the canonical Old Testament books, even by Catholics and Orthodox who include them in their Old Testament because of their ancient usage and recognized value from ancient times. Protestants completely reject these books from the Old Testament canon.

**Canon:** From Greek for rod, rule, standard or list. A list of authoritative books accepted by the Church as uniquely inspired by God.

**General Revelation:** The means by which God makes himself known through the creation, and mankind in particular.

**Koran:** The book considered by Muslims to be uniquely inspired. It was given to the prophet Mohammed in a trans-like state prior to 622 A.D.

**Inerrancy:** The affirmation that the Bible in its original form is free of all falsehood, fraud, or deceit.

**Infallibility:** The affirmation that the Bible is true and reliable in all matters that it addresses.

**Inspiration:** The means by which God insured that what was written by human writers of the Scripture was exactly what he intended to be written.

**Providence:** The oversight and care of God for all His creation; the means by which He works all things after the purpose of His own will, irregardless of the competing designs, purposes, forces, plans and choices of men or spirit beings.

**Rule of Faith:** The standard by which the patristic church judged truth including the Holy Scriptures, the baptismal creed, and the beliefs and practices of the churches founded by the apostles, especially the church of Rome. This standard led the church to place scripture and tradition on an equal footing in judging questions of faith and practice.

**Septuagint:** The Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible including the books of the Apocrypha. The word means seventy, reflecting the belief that 70 elders of Israel took 70 days to complete the translation under the order of Ptolemy Philadelphus of Egypt.

**Special Revelation:** Supernatural means by which God makes Himself known including the person of Christ, the Scriptures, and prophecy, visions, dreams or gifts of the Holy Spirit.

**Tradition:** The non-scriptural practices, beliefs, decisions, and laws of the historic church.

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### **3. Who is God? (Westminster Confession, Chapters Two, Three, Four and Five)**

#### **3.1 God's Attributes and the Decrees**

Chapter II of the Confession begins by stating plainly the unity of God (He is one) and the many attributes of God affirmed in Scripture. Traditionally, theologians recognize three attributes of God which are included in the lists cited in the Chapter, but are not exhaustive. These are: God's omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence.

Of particular interest in the Confession is the reference to God's omniscience, or knowledge of all things. "In His sight all things are open and manifest. His knowledge is infinite, infallible, and independent upon the creature, so as nothing is to him contingent or uncertain" (Chapter II, 2). The Puritan view of God's sovereignty leaves no room for a question about God's ability to know the future, or even determine the future by decree. A current theological controversy is over a doctrine known as "Open Theism" which teaches that God does not fully know the future because it is contingent on Man's choices. The teaching is in vogue in some places and is a clear departure from historic orthodoxy.

Paragraph 1 of Chapter III addresses with simplicity, yet depth, the age-old question of God's sovereignty in light of human actions and designs. "God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established."

God's ability to decree and know the future, including the thoughts and choices of mankind are demonstrated by the following scriptures, among others: Ps. 115:3 ; Ps.139:1-4, 15-16; Acts 2:23, 4:27-28, 15:18, 17:26.

#### **3.2 The Trinity**

The unity of the Godhead in a Trinity of persons is declared in II,3. The doctrine of the Trinity was one of the most contested doctrines in the patristic era, particularly the deity of Christ. The first great challenge to this belief came in 319 AD in Alexandria from Arius, presbyter of the church in Alexandria. He challenged his bishop Alexander and taught that since the Son was begotten, "there was [a time] when He did not exist." That is, the Son is a created being and distinct from God the Father, i.e. not fully God. So the unity of the Godhead is denied. This doctrine came to be known as Arianism and was the controversy which provoked the First Council at Nicea in 325 (the Nicene Creed is named for this council, though the Creed itself dates from the Council of Constantinople in 381).

The theological term which defines the divinity of Christ and the relations between the Father and the Son is the Greek word *homoousios* meaning one or same (*homo*) essence

or substance (*ousios*). That is, there is no distinction in nature between the Father and the Son. The Nicene Creed captures this idea in the terms “begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father by whom all things were made.” These phrases are all explicit refutations of the Arian doctrine.

Even after Nicea addressed the issues of the deity of Christ there were those who preferred the term *homoiousios*, meaning of like, rather than same substance. What a difference a letter can make (the *i* is equivalent to Jesus’ jot, Hebrew yod, from which Greek and Latin get their letter *i*)! Also, the Arian party remained a force for another 55 years, until the Second Council finally established Nicene Christianity. Athanasius, later bishop of Alexandria, was the great champion of the deity of Christ at the Nicene Council.

Also the affirmation in the Confession regarding the proceeding of the Holy Spirit is a distinctly western view. “(T)he Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father *and the Son*.” (II,3, emphasis mine). In a theological distinction important to the Eastern Orthodox, they see the Spirit proceeding from the Father, but not the Son, which, in their view would make Him somehow subordinate to the Son.

It was the Cappadocian Fathers, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory Nazianzus, and Basil the Great, whose theological efforts finalized belief in the divinity of the Holy Spirit and the Trinity around the period of the Second Council (381).

These Trinitarian views of the Apostles’ Creed and Nicene Creed are affirmed in the Thirsty-Nine articles and carry over seamlessly, almost without mention, in the Westminster Confession. Much past suffering and trouble translate into a simple acknowledgement of a hard-earned truth. Such is the benefit we receive from those who have gone before us.

There were other Trinitarian and Christological concerns during this early period. Some of them can be summarized as follows:

Marcionism (mid-second century): Marcion was the son of a bishop on the Black Sea in Pontus. He went to Rome and was a presbyter there, but was excommunicated for developing the gnostic heresy of a certain Cerdo. The Marcionite gnostic sect was based in Rome and his ideas spread far and fast. Marcion produced an early, truncated canon. He divorced the Old Testament from the New and excluded many writings from his New Testament canon. His system was dualistic, espousing good and evil as opposing, equal forces. He embraced many of the writings of Paul but rejected others. He insisted that the scriptures we had received were corrupted.

Modalism, Sabellianism, and Patripassianism: This system under several names is Unitarianism. There is no Trinity or distinction of persons in the Godhead, only modes - differing forms -- of the same God. At first it dealt only with the Father and Son. Thus the belief that the Father

suffered (Patripassianism). Sabellianism was a form of modalism which included Father, Son and Spirit. In Unitarianism there is no distinction of the persons in the Godhead.

Sabellianism: Photinus, bishop of Sirmium and Marcellus of Ancyra, to 374, were leaders of this heretical belief. They suppressed the distinction of the persons of the Trinity. The persons of the Trinity were "modes" of the divine being, not persons in their own right.

Adoptionism: This is the belief that "Jesus was a human being uniquely chosen to exercise the function or role of divine sovereignty or Sonship. Divine power (personal or impersonal) so resided in Jesus that he may be regarded as a uniquely inspired person like, but far transcending the Old Testament prophets; his anointing by the Spirit (whether by baptism by John or at the moment of conception) created his Sonship, which thus falls in the same class with the Christian's adoptive sonship given at baptism" (Lionel R. Wickman, "Adoptionism" EEC, p. 12-13). This system denied the unity of the Trinity and eventually denied the divinity of Christ, saying Christ was adopted. Paul of Samosata "taught a modalistic form of Adoptionism and did away with the Son and Holy Spirit"(Hamell, p.58).

Arianism: Named for Arius a priest of Alexandria. He taught that the Son was a created being, made by the Father before the creation. He was son by adoption, then the Holy Spirit was created. He was resisted at the Nicene council. An Arian party remained in and out of the church for 55 years after Nicea.

Pneumatomachoi (Fighters against the Spirit): Macedonius of Constantinople was a leader of this group. They denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Their heresy was combated at the second council, Constantinople (381). The writings of Basil the Great of Caesarea of Pontus were instrumental in establishing the doctrine of the divinity of the Holy Spirit.

Apocryphal works: (Hamell, p.49). Many works were written about or in the name of the apostles but were rejected as spurious by the patristic church. "As to that work which is ascribed to him, called 'The Acts,' and the 'Gospel according to Peter,' and that called 'The Preaching and Revelations of Peter,' we know nothing of their being handed down as catholic writings" (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, III, iii). Some of the other rejected works were the Gospels according to the Hebrews, Peter, Philip, Thomas, etc.; Acts of Pilate, Acts of Peter and Paul, Acts of Paul and Thecla. Letter to the Laodiceans, III Corinthians, Apocalypse of Peter and Paul, and others.

### **3.3 God's Sovereignty and Providence**

Chapter III, "Of God's Eternal Decree," opens the most difficult of issues in the Confession and in the Calvinistic Reformed faith in general. That is, according to the Confession election or predestination is determined not by foreknowledge, but by the decree of God whereby "for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life; and others foreordained to everlasting death." These are difficult words, and they have created consternation for many believers. The clear statement of the Confession is that election is not based on foreknowledge, but rather by decree apart from works, act of will, or foreknowledge. This article has helped spawn two

competing systems of soteriology (doctrine of how we are saved) known as Calvinism (in support of the *Institutes* and embraced at Westminster) and Arminianism (as a reaction to it). I might add that while there is an argument in Scripture for double predestination, this declaration, as is, is not found in Scripture precisely as stated in the Confession.

The Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles addresses this issue in part as follows,

As the godly consideration of Predestination, and our Election in Christ, is full of sweet, pleasant and unspeakable comfort to godly persons, and such as feel in themselves the working of the Spirit of Christ . . . so for curious carnal persons, lacking the Spirit of Christ, to have continually before their eyes the sentence of God's Predestination, is a most dangerous downfall, whereby the Devil doth thrust them either into desperation, or into wretchedness of most unclean living . . . Furthermore, we must receive God's promises in such wise, as they be generally set forth to us in Holy Scripture; and in our doings, that Will of God is to be followed, which we have expressly declared unto us in the Word of God (Article XVII).

This position of the Puritans is probably the most controversial of their beliefs.

Calvin taught the doctrine of double predestination unapologetically while hedging his statements with reference to the secret or hidden counsels of God. That is, some truths should not be inquired into too far, lest we attempt to intrude into areas reserved for God alone.

The ancient Council of Orange (529) which clearly stated a belief in election, also vigorously refuted the doctrine of double predestination, "We not only do not believe that any are foreordained to evil by the power of God, but even state with utter abhorrence that if there are those who want to believe so evil a thing, they are anathema."

People ask me, "What do you believe?" I believe in the doctrine of election. It is biblical. I believe in the perseverance of the saints – the assurance of salvation to those who are saved. I am not an Arminian. Yet, I feel a case can be made from Scripture to support that point of view. I think the Thirty-nine articles are a better and more temperate statement of the mystery of election than the Westminster statement. So, while declaring myself Reformed, I would follow this axiom: when the Scriptures are Arminian, preach like an Arminian, where they reflect the sovereignty of God, emphasize that. We do not preach a theological system, but the Word of God. We must learn to live with this "truth in tension." The conflicting issues of election, God's love for all men, and questions of human agency, are a kind of mystery, a calculus that we only begin to glimpse here on this earth.

### 3.4 The Creator and Ruler

The Confession affirms certain of the doctrines of Creation. First, the universe both visible and invisible were created by the Triune God *ex nihilo*, that is, out of nothing. Second, that man (male and female) made in God's image is the crowning act of God's creation, and has been given the dominion (stewardship) over the creation.

Along with the doctrine of creation, is the doctrine providence, whereby 'God the Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and Holy providence, according to His infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will, to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.'

#### Discussion Questions:

1. Why do we talk about "the presence of God" when God is present everywhere?
2. Do you think it matters whether we are Unitarian or Trinitarian as long as we believe in the deity of Christ?
3. If God controls my destiny, what difference do my choices make?

#### Readings for Chapter Three

Beall on Calvinism and Arminianism

Bettensen, The Arian Syllogism, The Council of Trent, and Arminianism

Calvin on Election

Leith, The Council of Orange

#### Glossary:

**Arianism:** Named for Arius who taught that there was (a time) when the Son was not, thus denying the full divinity of the Son of God.

**Arminian Soteriology:** The theological system of Jacob Arminius which emphasizes the choices and decisions of man in determining such questions as election, predestination, and perseverance of the saints. This system limits predestination to God's foreknowledge.

**Athanasius:** Presbyter and later bishop of Alexandria who opposed Arianism at the Council of Nicea. He is the champion of Nicene Christianity which defends the divinity of Christ and is the foundation for belief in the Trinity.

**Calvinist Soteriology:** The system of salvation which emphasizes God's sovereign choices in matters of election, predestination, and perseverance of the saints. While this system acknowledges human choices, they are dependant on God's sovereign decrees, though not violated by them.

**Cappadocian Fathers:** Basil of Caesarea (the Great), Gregory Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa whose theology firmly and finally established Trinitarian orthodoxy.

**Council of Constantinople:** Second Ecumenical (world) Council in 381 which established the doctrine of the divinity of the Holy Spirit and thus the doctrine of the Trinity. The Nicene Creed is finalized at this Council.

**Divine Attributes:** Three primary attributes of God, among many, recognized by theologians historically are that He is omniscient (all-knowing), omnipotent (almighty), and omnipresent (present everywhere at once).

**Modalism:** The anti-Trinitarian belief that there are no distinct persons in the Godhead, only three modes or manifestations of the one God.

**Monotheism:** Belief in a single God, as opposed to many gods. Judaism, Christianity and Islam are considered the three monotheistic faiths. Hinduism is an example of a multi-theistic faith.

**Nicene Creed:** The Creed accepted by Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant communions as expressing the foundational doctrines of the Christian faith including the deity of Christ and the Holy Spirit, and the doctrine of the Trinity.

**Patripassianism:** The modalistic (Unitarian) heresy which teaches that the Father suffered on the cross with the Son.

**Sovereignty:** The trait of God whereby he has sole and complete authority over the entire created order and rules it in freedom to do as He wills with all things, but always in keeping with His nature and goodness..

**Trinity:** The belief that one God exists in three co-eternal persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit who are of the same essence (*homoousios*) or nature. Each person (*prosopon*) is distinct and yet one in essence or substance.

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## **4. Who is Man? (Westminster Confession, Chapters Four (paragraph two), Six, Eleven)**

### **4.1 Man in God's Image**

The Confession affirms the special place of man in God's created order. "After God made all other creatures, He created man male and female, with reasonable and immortal souls, endued with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness, after His own image, having the law written in their hearts and power to fulfill it; and yet under a possibility of transgressing, being left to the liberty of their own will, which was subject to change"(IV, 2).

Scripture teaches the unique role of mankind in the creation and his special relation to God (Gen. 1:26-30, Gen. 2:7). It is said only of man that 1) he was made in the image and likeness of God, 2) he was given the dominion over the creation (implying a stewardship and interdependence), and 3) was fashioned by God, unlike the other creatures. God took special care with mankind to establish his role in the creation and due to his unique faculties established special responsibilities of obedience.

Of what does the image of God in man consist? Theologians have put forward various ideas over the centuries. Some have said the high faculties of reason, will or speech; others the fact that man is a tri-partite being, body, soul and spirit; others that man has a unique ability to commune with God, to share in the Holy Spirit; still others that man alone reflects God's character in his dominion (naming and ruling over the animals and other creation), or that he alone was called to obedience of a God-given command. There is truth in these various proposals. I think the conscience is a seat of the image of God in man (Rom. 2:14-15). Man alone is self-aware, may have regrets and is bound by a moral duty which he usually or often does not fulfill. It is clear from scripture that man is a primary focus of God's thoughts (Prov. 8: 22-31, Ps. 82:6).

Man's separateness, uniqueness, and superiority to the rest of the creation is agreed on in historical theology. This puts the animistic concept that all creation equally contains the spirit of God in a sub-biblical, sub-Christian category. Likewise, the New Age belief that we have a divine spark within, that simply needs to be identified or cultivated is a heretical belief. The doctrine of God and Creation tells us that God is always superior to and separate from his creation. Some Christians, particularly in the faith camp of recent years, have failed to distinguish between Creator and creature. They have taught, not simply that we are *in Christ*, but that we *are* Christ. Any doctrine which blurs the distinction between God and man, Creator and creature is either sub-Christian or heretical.

### **4.2 The Fall and Its Consequences for Mankind (Original Sin)**

Chapter VI of the Confession clearly addresses the Fall, sin and its consequences. While man was originally righteous, he lost that status as a result of disobedience against the command of God. The Fall has a permanent effect on the human race *and* the Creation.

The man's relationship to God, male-female relationships, and mankind's relationship to the created order become subject to sin and distortion as a consequence of the Fall. (Gen 3: 8-24; Rom. 8:18-25).

Several terms are used to describe the result of the Fall. One is accursed (Heb. *'arar*) which means "to bind (with a spell), hem in with obstacles, render powerless to resist" (TWOT, vol. 1, p. 75). It seems to indicate the inability to fulfill one's purpose or destiny, or to render powerless to act. This seems the opposite of blessing which released the men and woman into fruitfulness and dominion, a fulfillment of their purpose, and a manifestation of their highest calling. Thus to be accursed it to be prevented from fulfilling one's created purpose. The purpose of the original creation is bound or hemmed in by the Fall and its consequences.

Another word used in the Gen. 3 account is *'atsav*, "in *painful toil* you shall eat of it (the fruit of the ground). Again this word carries the idea of "thwarted." So that no matter how hard he worked the man would have a sense that the earth was thwarted from its original goodness.

A third word used in Romans 8:20 is futility (Gr. *mataiotes*). The creation has been subject to futility – but in the hope of redemption.

So we see that man created in God's image and the creation he was to steward is subject to futility, an inability to fulfill its original goodness. He, and it, are in need of redemption. This leads us to several doctrines, Original Sin, Redemption of the Created Order, and Glorification (in Eastern Orthodoxy theosis or deification).

#### **4.5 Sin Defined**

Scripturally and according to systematic theologians (See Williams), sin is pervasive, inherited, and individual. The Confession recognizes the results of the Fall on humanity and the fact of Original Sin. "They being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed, and the same death in sin, and corrupted nature, conveyed to all their posterity descending from them by ordinary generation" (VI, 3). Romans 5:12-19 most clearly states the concept of original sin, but Rom. 3: 9-18 states its result, what we might call total depravity as cited in VI,4 of the Confession: "From this original corruption, whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil, do proceed all actual transgressions."

The Confession also acknowledges the presence of natural corruption in the Christian throughout the earthly life as stated in VI, 5, "This corruption of nature, during this life, doth remain in those that are regenerated; and although it be, through Christ, pardoned, and mortified; yet both itself, and all the motions thereof, are truly and properly sin." This view comes into some conflict with the doctrine of entire sanctification in later Wesleyan Methodism (18<sup>th</sup> century). This is the belief that believers, through an experience of the Holy Spirit, can be completely free from all known sin in their life.

One of the strongest statements of the doctrine of original sin is found in Ephesians 2:1-4. There mankind is shown as dead in transgression (actual sinful actions) and sin, bound by unhealthy, unholy desires, *by nature* children of wrath, and under the influence the spirit of this age (the devil) who is at work in the children of disobedience. So sin penetrates to our nature, our actions, our state of being, our thoughts, the spiritual influences that motivate us

Two biblical words, transgression and iniquity, address this question as well. A transgression refers to “crossing a boundary,” i.e. a sinful act. Iniquity means “twistedness” and refers to an imperfection or mis-shapeness of nature. We fail to be what we are originally created to be – a perfect reflection of the image and likeness of God.

#### **4.6 Free-Will and the Pelagian Controversy**

All of this discussion leads eventually to the doctrine of redemption. But first, a controversy of historical import -- the Pelagian Controversy. Aren't we free to obey God or not? Don't we have free will to obey his commands if we choose to? Isn't it blasphemy to say that God commands us to be or behave a certain way, if we are unable to fulfill that command? If you think so, then you are a Pelagian.

The classic (and deficient) understanding of free-will says the will in man is the seat of the image of God, and that it has been untainted by the Fall. Pelagius (a fourth-fifth century British monk with influence in Rome and Palestine), taught against the doctrine of Original Sin. We are not sinners by nature, but only by action. Theoretically, we could make the right choices all of our life, and only if we failed in actual fact would we be sinners. The doctrine was and is very attractive to those who want to hold a high view of human dignity and a low view of human depravity. Pelagianism has a lot in common with New Age beliefs. Pelagius was opposed by Augustine and Jerome, who insisted that we are saved by grace, and because of original sin and our fallen nature, *must* be saved by grace. By grace, according to them we continue in obedience. They are, in essence, the first Protestants. Many of Augustine's beliefs, while embraced by Catholicism, are refuted at the same time. Historic Catholicism, especially the Council of Trent emphasize the need for good works to accompany faith, to the point where they become a means of justification – at least in the eyes of some.

Pelagianism is at root the denial of original sin. Many of the statements of the Council of Orange address Pelagian doctrinal concerns. The Confession VI,4 clearly refutes Pelagianism, and is written to that end. (Gal. 2:15-16)

#### **4.7 The Doctrine of Justification**

In Chapter XI of the Confession, it is made clear that Christ' obedience and his alone brings justification to the one who believes. What is made clear is that the no action by

the individual can add to or is necessary to complete the actions of Christ on their behalf. It is an imputed righteousness by a federal head, as in Adam. Thus in scripture, Christ is called the second Adam (I Cor. 15:45, Psalm 8).

An element which crept into the thinking of the church in the second century was the belief in Mary as the second Eve, an idea first put forward by Irenaeus. Ideas of Mary's special status as *Theotokos*, perpetual virgin, intercessor, co-redemptrix, and finally immaculately conceived, and assumed (taken bodily) into heaven. These were ideas that accompanied the belief that Christ's human nature required a sinless vessel. Augustine actually put forward the belief that the contamination of sexual intercourse was the means by which the sin nature was passed from parent to child. Thus celibacy in general, and Mary's perpetual celibacy specifically, became a superior, even necessary status for priests in Roman Catholicism.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. How would you describe the dominion mandate? What is its purpose?
2. Is animism completely false? Why or why not?
3. What is it about "faith teaching" and the authority of the believer that violates the doctrine of God and Creation? Is there anything good about it?
4. Is sin always a choice?
5. Does the doctrine of total depravity go too far?
5. Why is Pelagius wrong?

### **Readings for Chapter Four**

Council of Orange  
Elwell  
Pelagius  
Augustine  
Lossky  
Meyendorf  
Trent  
Williams

### **Council Watch**

**Nicea** (325 A.D.): The Council which established the divinity of Christ as orthodox belief. It was in opposition to Arius who taught that Christ was a created being. Athanasius was the champion of Nicene Christianity.

**Constantinople** (381 A.D.): Established the divinity of the Holy Spirit, and thus the Trinity. It was opposed to the *pneumatomachoi* (fighters against the Spirit) who denied the personality and divinity of the Spirit. The Cappadocians Gregory Nyssa, Gregory Nazianzen and Basil of Caesarea were the champions of the Trinity. The Nicene Creed was finalized here.

**Trent** (1645-63): The council of the counter-reformation called to address the theological and ecclesiastical crisis brought on by the Protestant Reformation. It affirmed the Nicene Creed, authority of scripture and tradition, the church as the only interpreter of scripture. “Its decrees on Original Sin and on Justification and Merit struck at the root of the Protestant system.”(E.A Livingstone, ed., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 520-1)

## Glossary

**Fall of Man:** The doctrine that Adam and Eve fell through their disobedience, losing their relationship with God, and their place in paradise. The consequences of their disobedience affected their posterity and the creation itself.

**Iniquity:** A twistedness of nature or character, sinful in nature.

**Glorification:** The doctrine whereby the redeemed in Christ ultimately share in his glorified nature (body) and a place of privilege in heaven without actual taking on his deity.

**Justification by Faith:** The belief that Christ’s obedience and sacrifice at Calvary, and faith in that work, are sufficient to obtain forgiveness and a blameless position before God the Father completely apart from any works on the part of the justified persons.

**Mariology:** Doctrines about the person and role of Mary in redemption which give her a place as God-bearer, Second Eve, intercessor, and co-redemptrix. These beliefs are held in varying degrees by Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, but are rejected by Protestants.

**Original Sin:** The sin of Adam whereby the entire race was counted guilty and inherited a fallen nature suffering corruption and death through the first Adam.

**Pelagius, Pelagianism:** A British monk who died in the early fifth century and who emphasized the role of human will in salvation and the ability of mankind to obey the commands of God unaided. He denied original sin and considered human nature to be neutral at birth.

**Transgression:** A sinful act which crosses a boundary. Actual or active sin as opposed to iniquity which is a distortion of nature.

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## **5. How are we saved?**

### **(Westminster Confession, Chapters Seven, Eight, Ten, Eleven, Twelve, Fourteen, Fifteen, Sixteen, Nineteen)**

#### **5.1 The Concept of Covenant**

Covenant is a central concept of the Bible, so much so that our Scriptures are divided into the New Testament (Covenant) and the Old Testament (Covenant). The New Testament word for covenant is from Greek *diatheke*. Its root means, “to distribute, establish, separate, determine, dispose, set in a state or position.” (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol ii, 104). It signifies a legal instrument whereby relationships are established, defined and regulated.

Some of the characteristics of Covenants are a meal (often a sacrificial meal), an exchange of articles, an oath or solemn commitment to stated behaviors which may include blessings for fulfillment and curses for breaking the covenant.

The Old Testament word for covenant is “to cut a covenant” (Heb. *Karat berit*) signifying the role of animal sacrifice in establishing a covenant. The sacrifice may become part of the covenant meal as well as a symbol of the curse to come upon the one who breaks the covenant. (Jeremiah 34:12-20; Gen. 15:7-21).

There many covenants in the Old Testament including God and Abraham, Isaac and Abimelech, Laban and Jacob, David and Jonathan, God and David, marriage is referred to as a covenant.

The New Covenant is found succinctly stated in Hebrews 8:10 ff. which is taken from the Old Testament book of Jeremiah.

Covenant is the central concept of the sacrament of communion. There is a meal (body and blood of Christ), a sacrifice (cross), a mutual relationship, and obligations. We declare His loyalty to us and by implication our commitment to him. A future inheritance is a central promise of the covenant as well as a new life, a new heart, and forgiveness

#### **5.2 Christology**

One of the concepts associated with covenant is that of mediator. In many Old Testament transaction there is a priest who mediates the covenant. This is done by offering the sacrifice and pronouncing the terms of blessing or curse. The Hebrew term for priest is *kohayn* from *kun* meaning “to stand” or “stand before.” The Greek word for priest is *hierus* from which we get the word hierarchy. The Old Testament concept of priesthood created a hierarchy of access to God. Many liturgical functions were limited to the priests. The entrance into the Holy Place or the Holy of Holies is an example.

The New Testament emphasizes the idea of a priesthood of believers. This does not mean that there is no order or leadership role in the New Testament, but it does mean that access to God is unrestricted by one's standing in the community. There is ultimately one high priest, Jesus, who is the mediator of the covenant. While we do intercede for one another, we are not mediators in the sense that Jesus is. Every believer's priestly role is based on the single high priesthood of Jesus.

The New Testament teaches that "There is one God and one mediator between God and Man, the man Jesus Christ"(I Tim. 2:5). Christ is the only mediator of our salvation. "There is not other name given under heaven whereby we must be saved"(Acts 4:12) This means that salvation is found exclusively in Christ. (Mediator, VIII, paragraph 1; co-equal, one substance, para. 2)

### Christological controversies

The Christological Controversies: The Councils of Ephesus (3<sup>rd</sup> Ecumenical, 431 A.D.) and Chalcedon (4<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical, 451 A.D.)

The third through the fifth ecumenical councils address Christological questions. Specifically, how do the divine and human natures in Christ co-exist together in one person. Are the natures constant, changed, intermingled, or transformed by the *hypostatic* union?

Many proposed controversial theological constructs concerning the person of Christ. These included Appolinarianism, Adoptionism, Nestorianism, Monophysitism, and Monothelism (these are defined below). Many of these controversies are resolved in what is known as the definition of Chalcedon, or the Tome of Leo, Bishop of Rome. Contemporary Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholics and Protestant communions hold to the Chalcedonian definition. Though monophysite and Nestorian communities (see below) who differ on their Christology, did remain, especially in Egypt, Syria and the east.

The first great controversy concerning the person of Christ arose over the doctrine of his divinity, which pitted Arius and Athanasius, both of Alexandria, against each other. Their dispute was resolved doctrinally at Nicea, in 325. But the practice of Arianism was not eliminated from the church until almost a generation later.

How the human and divine natures of Christ united in one person was the subject of ongoing controversies addressed at the Councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451).

### The Christologies of Antioch and Alexandria

Theodore of Mopsuestia, Bishop from 392-428: Theodore's Christology was typically Antiochian. Theologians of Antioch tended to emphasize the human nature of Christ. That is, His incarnation as a fully human being possessing mind, will, and emotions as well as a physical body. Christ's sufferings and temptations were all emphasized in Antiochene Christology. Theodore tended to divide the natures of Christ, seemingly denying a *hypostatic* union of the

natures after the incarnation.. He was a contemporary and forerunner of Nestorius. At 2nd Constantinople (553) he was condemned.

Cyril of Alexandria (?-444): Became bishop of Alexandria in 412. He was a leading figure in the opposition to Nestorius (below). He espoused that the divine and human natures in Christ became one after the union. That is, the human nature is transformed after being united with the divine after the incarnation. Cyril is by some accused of introducing monophysite (one nature after the union) Christology into the Egyptian church. Others saw him as laying the groundwork for the Chalcedonian definition to come later.

Cyril maintained an emphasis on the divinity of Christ and the union of the two natures in one *prosopon* (person). His theology is considered to be foundational for both the Chalcedonian definition and the monophysite doctrine. Cyril's Christology is sufficiently incomplete to lead to both of these conclusions. His emphasis on Christ's divinity counterbalances traditional Antiochene Christology emphasizing Christ's humanity.

Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople from 428-431: Nestorius was a monk, and later, presbyter, of Antioch. He was probably influenced by the teaching of Theodore of Mopsuestia. Reportedly he was an outstanding preacher. He was named patriarch of Constantinople in 428. He was of the Antiochene school of Christology. Early in his patriarchate he made pronouncements and preached sermons opposing the use of the title "Mother of God" (*theotokos*) for Mary, preferring the term "Christ bearer" (*christotokos*). These pronouncements generated a controversy over his Christology. It seems that he held to a peculiar heterodox Christology, which appeared to make Christ two persons after the incarnation. Jesus appeared to be both Son of God and Son of Man in a way that denied the unity of personality. There is still disagreement over precisely what Nestorius taught concerning Jesus.

Some feel he was the victim of a power struggle between Alexandria and Constantinople. His teaching and rivalry with the bishop of Alexandria sparked tension between the two and led to Cyril's accusations against Nestorius as a heretic. This led to the council at Ephesus which deposed Nestorius in 431. His followers formed a church in the east which expanded through Persia, Arabia, Kurdistan, India and all the way to China by the end of the millennium. There is some evidence that Nestorian missionaries succeeded penetrating as far as Korea and Japan with their brand Christology, and a great emphasis on practical ministry including medical missions. The Nestorian church survived many centuries and its remnants are found in Iraq and Iran today.

Most of his writings were destroyed. *The Bazaar of Heracleides* discovered at the turn of the century is believed to have been his and is an explanation and defense of his Christology. A careful reading reveals a deficient Christology, never quite coming to a confession that there is a *hypostatic* union of the human and divine in Christ, making one new person, fully God and fully man after the incarnation. It resembles adoptionism in its approach.

Leo the Great (pope from 440-461) became bishop of Rome in a very difficult period. Old Rome was being overrun by barbarian tribes and the Christological controversies continued to rage within the church, particularly the Monophysite heresy. He was chiefly responsible for formulating the Chalcedonian formula. He met the invaders Attila (452) and Genseric (455) outside Rome to spare the city from the severity of an attack by their armies. Due to the disintegration of the civil administration, the temporal power of the Roman bishop increased greatly during his time. Much of this was due to the collapse of the western capital, and the transfer of political power to Constantinople (New Rome) and the incursions of barbarian (non-Roman) tribes. Much of Leo's correspondence reflects disciplinary concerns of the western churches as well as such temporal matters as securing grain shipments from other provinces for the Roman populace.

Leo wrote many homilies, letters and his famous "Tome of Leo." This latter was the basis of the Chalcedonian formula and addressed the monophysite and Nestorian controversies. The Chalcedonian definition, adopted at the fourth ecumenical council held at Chalcedon in 451, was Leo's great contribution to theology. It continues today to be the emblem of orthodox Christology in all Catholic, Protestant and many Orthodox communions today.

We also teach that we apprehend this one and only Christ – Son, Lord, only-begotten – in two natures [*duo physesis*]; and we do this without confusing the two natures, without transmuting one nature into the other, without dividing them into two separate categories, without contrasting them according to area or function. The distinctiveness of each nature is not nullified by the union. Instead the 'properties' of each nature are conserved and both natures concur in one 'person' [*prosopon*] and in one *hypostasis*. They are not divided or cut into two *prosopa*, but are together the one and only and only-begotten Logos of God, the Lord Jesus Christ (The Definition of Chalcedon in Leith, p. 36).

Monophysitism teaches that there is only one incarnate nature in Christ after the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures in Christ. This doctrine falls short of the Chalcedonian definition which clearly establishes two unconfused and unmixed natures (the human and the divine) in *hypostatic* union in the one person, the Lord Jesus Christ. The fifth council at Constantinople (553) "condemned conspicuous representatives of the theology of Antioch: Theodore of Mopsuestia, the anti-Cyrillian writing of Theodoret of Cyrus, and the letter of Ibas to Marius, the Perisan. It gave approval to the '*hypostatic* union' that was so important to the Alexandrians...The council made possible an Alexandrian interpretation of Chalcedon, but it did not reject the Chalcedonian definition" (Leith, p.45-46). In some ways the fifth council has been seen as an appeasement of the Alexandrian faction which leaned toward monophysitism without violating Chalcedon.

The monophysites believed that Chalcedon did not properly define the unity of Christ's person. The monophysites (meaning one nature) emphasized the divinity of Christ over his manhood –

the opposite of Antiochene tendencies. According to George Giacomakis in “Monophysitism” in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, monophysite teaching harkens back to Egyptian and Syro-Palestinian monasticism. Their ascetic tradition emphasizes the complete suppression of human desire in order to gain union with the divine. Likewise, monophysites de-emphasize the place of the human in Christ’s person, while emphasizing his divinity. The monophysite controversy led to violent upheavals in Syria, Palestine and Egypt. It eventually led to schism which affects the eastern churches even today.

Another related controversy was monotheletism. If the divine and human so combine in Christ as to form one nature (*physis*), then it follows that Christ had one (*mono*) will (*thelesis*). The council of Constantinople (681) was called to deal with this issue and ruled in favor of diotheletism; i.e. Christ possessed a divine and a human will.

The belief that only one will (the divine) resided in the person of Christ after the incarnation, was rooted in monophysitism, and was thus considered a threat to Chalcedonian Orthodoxy. The sixth ecumenical council held at Constantinople (681) addressed this heresy.

We also proclaim two natural willings or wills in him and two natural operations, without separation, without change, without partition, without confusion, according to the teaching of the Holy Fathers – and two natural wills not contrary to each other...but his human will following, and not resisting or opposing, but rather subject to his divine and all-powerful will.”

(W)e declare that his two natures shine forth in one *hypostasis*, in which he displayed both the wonders and the sufferings through the whole course of his dispensation, not in phantasm, but truly... each nature wills and works what is proper to it, in communion with the other. On this principle we glorify two natural wills and operations combining with each other for the salvation of the human race (The Statement of Faith at the Third Council of Constantinople, Sixth Ecumenical, 681, Leith. Pp. 50-52).

Regardless of Christological controversies, one thing is clear, Protestants represented by the Westminster Confession viewed Christ the mediator, and his atoning death, as all-sufficient for the salvation of those who truly believe.

### **5.3 Saving Faith, Repentance, Good Works**

The word church (Greek *ekklesia*) refers to those called or called out. The concept of effectual calling is referred to in Scripture, though it is only the term calling itself that is

actually used. (Eph. 1, Rom. 8, John 6, I Thess. 1, II Thess. 2). The idea of effectual calling falls in line with the Reformed understanding of salvation. Many are called, but few are chosen. Therefore, it is only the effectually called who are actually saved. They are not saved against their will, but are made willing to come to Christ by the grace of God.

This addresses three categories of controversy. First, infants, then backsliders, and “good” non-Christians. These ideas are addressed in the following excerpts from the Confession:

3. Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated and saved by Christ, through the Spirit, who worketh when, and where, and how He pleaseth: so also are all other elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word.

4. Others, not elected, although they may be called by the ministry of the Word, and may have some common operations of the Spirit, yet they never truly come unto Christ, and therefore cannot be saved: much less can men, not professing the Christian religion, be saved in any other way whatsoever, be they never so dilligent to frame their lives according to the light of nature, and the laws of that religion they do profess. And to assert and maintain that they may, is very pernicious, and to be detested.

The word for repentance is *metanoia* which means a change of mind. Like its sister word metamorphosis, it indicates a complete and dramatic change, but in this case a change of mind as opposed to a change in body. The Confession makes clear that repentance is not a work of merit but of grace.

What does repentance look like? Article XV, paragraph 2 puts it aptly:

2. By it, a sinner, out of the sight and sense not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, as contrary to the holy nature, and righteous law of God; and upon the apprehension of his mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, so grieves for, and hates his sins, as to from them all unto God, purposing and endeavoring to walk with Him in all the ways of His commandments.

Paragraph 4 makes clear that repentance is not a work of merit whereby we earn forgiveness. Confession of sins to others, including public confession is recognized as necessary to repentance in some cases (paragraph 6).

Faith: As described in the Confession faith is the work of the Spirit in the heart, is normally brought about by the ministry of the Word of God (Rom. 10:17). And is the means of salvation. “But the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.”

The issue of the sufficiency of faith in Christ alone as the basis of salvation was a cornerstone of Reformation belief. Luther and those after him insisted on the biblical statement, “The just shall live by faith.” I would ask faith in what? The Confession answers the question -- faith alone in the finished work of Christ alone.

This is contrasted with the Council of Trent which states that the following is anathema: “That justification once received is not preserved and even increased in the sight of God through good works; but that these same works are only fruits and signs of justification, not causes of its increase. (Eph. 2:8-9).

But the Confession states concerning good works:

These good works, done in obedience to God’s commandments, are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith: and by them believers manifest their thankfulness, strengthen their assurance, edify their brethren, adorn the profession of the gospel, stop the mouths of the adversaries, and glorify God, whose workmanship they are, created in Christ Jesus thereunto, that, having their fruit unto holiness, they may have the end, eternal life (XVI, para. 2).

Some Scripture references to works (Phil. 2:12-13; Titus 3:1, 14; I Cor. 3:11-15).

Adoption: Those saved by faith are partakers of the grace of adoption. “[They] are enabled to cry Abba, Father, are pitied, protected, provided for, and chastened by Him as by a Father: yet never castoff, but sealed to the day of redemption; and inherit the promises, as heirs of everlasting salvation” (Article XII).

## **5.4 The Old Testament Law**

The concept of the Law in biblical context has several meanings. First of all, there is the *Torah*, or teaching, which refers to the first five books of Moses, but also the moral law, or Ten Commandments given to Moses on Sinai. In addition, the confession recognizes two other forms of law. The first is the ceremonial law. This includes various dietary, cleanliness, sacrificial and liturgical practices (such as circumcision) required by Moses, but which actually point to the dispensation of Christ (Col. 2:16 ff.). The second is the civil (or judicial) law given specifically to the people of Israel as a means of ordering their civil affairs. These include such things as procedures for redeeming property, forgiving debts, valuing property, penalties for crimes such as theft, maiming, manslaughter or murder. When the New Testament refers to keeping the law, it may mean any of these three, though usually it refers to the moral law.

It is generally acknowledged that the moral law is of great use and authority to Christians, though keeping it is neither the cause nor the guarantee of salvation. The Confession states it this way:

Although true believers be not under the law, as a covenant of works to be thereby justified, or condemned; yet it is of great use to them, as well as to others; in that,

as a rule of life informing them of the will of God, and their duty, it directs and binds them to walk accordingly; discovering also the sinful pollutions of their nature, hearts, and lives; so as, examining themselves thereby, they may come to further conviction of, humiliation for, and hatred against sin, together with a clearer sight of the need they have of Christ, and the perfection of His obedience (Chapter XIX, 6).

The apostle Paul speaks to the issue of the law repeatedly in his epistles. (Rom. 3:19-24; 7:13-4; 6:1-2,15; Gal. 2:15-16, 21; 3:21-25)

### **Discussion Questions**

How do we falsely view repentance in terms of gaining forgiveness?  
Should we encourage the practice of confession? Why or why not?  
Are good works required of Christians for salvation?  
Should sins confessed and forgiven give immediate restoration to the penitent to privileges of worship? Of leadership?

### **Readings for Chapter Five**

Calvin on Penitence  
TWOT on Covenant  
Chalcedonian Definition  
Luther on Penance  
Trent on Penance

### **Glossary**

**Adoption:** The grace whereby we become children of God through adoption and joint heirs of God with Jesus Christ and enjoy all the privileges of sonship before Him.

**Chalcedonian Definition:** From the Fourth Ecumenical Council (Chalcedon 451). The definition of the Christological question “How do the human and divine natures in Christ relate one to another after the incarnation?” Jesus full divinity and full humanity are affirmed in the definition.

**Confession:** The practice of confessing one’s sins to a priest in private to receive absolution (or forgiveness) from the priest in behalf of Christ. Usually a penance is assigned to bring about satisfaction for the sin. The Reformers recognized the value of confession of sin but not its sacramental character or the need for satisfaction which is found in the merit of the finished work of Christ alone.

**Covenant:** The means by which God orders and regulates His relationships with mankind.

**Effectual Calling:** The work of grace which brings a sinner out of their fallen, sinful state into a state of grace and justification before God through faith in the finished work of Christ’s atoning death.

**Old Testament Law:** The Law is the Torah of Moses (first five books). It is also the moral (ten commandments), ceremonial, and judicial or civil law contained therein. Nestorius, Nestorianism: A deficient belief concerning the relationship of the human and divine natures in Christ so that they don't truly form a single *hupostasis* or person, but seemingly two separate persons. Nestorius was a fifth century bishop of Constantinople and his followers founded a church which spread to the far east and exists in some middle eastern countries to this day.

**Monophysite:** The teaching that Jesus had one nature, the divine, after the incarnation, combining the human and divine in Christ.

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## **6. How do we become holy? (Westminster Confession, Chapters Thirteen, Fifteen, Sixteen, Seventeen, Eighteen)**

### **6.1 Sanctification**

The word sanctification appears in both the Old and New Testaments. The Hebrew word is *qadosh*, or a variant, and the Greek word is *hagias*, or a variant. It carries two basic meanings: to set apart, or to make clean, which connotes the idea of purity, moral purity in particular. Hence the idea of holiness is to be set apart *from* the world, the flesh, and the devil, and to be set apart *to* God for holy or pure purposes. It also indicates that an individual has been cleansed from the guilt and the power of sin. This cleansing or sanctification has the practical effect not only of justifying a sinner, but transforming their nature. The word *hagios* is the word for saint, which simply means holy or sanctified one.

Biblically, sanctification is both a completed work and an ongoing process. The sense that it is a completed work is found in the following two statements: *“And by that will we ha been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all . . . Because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy”*(Heb.10:10, 14); *“And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God”* (I Cor. 6:11). These passages speak of sanctification in a manner indicating completion. From these verses it appears sanctification is a completed fact. However, other teaching indicates that our sanctification is an ongoing process. *“Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope purifies himself as he is pure”* I John 3: 2-3). *“For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son . . .”* (Rom. 8:29). *“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind”* (Rom 12:2). (Also, see Eph. 4:20-32; Col 3: 5-14). These passages indicate that our behavior is “catching up” with our status as redeemed, justified, and sanctified believers.

The means of our sanctification is also broached in these passages. How are we set apart or made clean and delivered from the guilt and power of sin? First, the blood of Jesus is the agent of our cleansing. Second, the Spirit of God, and third, the name of Christ. Fourthly, the word of God is mentioned as a cleansing agent (Eph. 5:26). So we see that our cleansing or sanctification is not a matter of our own works. I find many people believe salvation is a work of grace, but sanctification is a work of merit. Not so. While sanctification involves growth, effort, and acts of the will, they are entirely works of grace accomplished through the gifts of Christ’s blood, the operations of the Spirit, the name of Jesus, faith in the will of God, the power of His word (II Peter 1:3-11).

The Westminster Confession sees sanctification (Chapter XIII) as a work of grace and a process. Those who are regenerated with a new heart and spirit: “Are further sanctified, really and personally, through the virtue of Christ’s death and resurrection, by His Word and Spirit dwelling in them, the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed, and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified, and they are more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces . . . .” The Confession goes on to state that believers engage in a continual lifelong battle between flesh and spirit and that some believers may suffer setbacks in their efforts but their regenerate nature will ultimately prevail.

A doctrine of entire sanctification as a second blessing related to the infilling of the Holy Spirit is common in many Wesleyan and Pentecostal churches. This is the belief that the Holy Spirit so overpowers the sin nature in a baptism of fire, that the believer is cleansed from all known sin. While indwelling sin remains, it is unconscious and the sanctified believer is victorious over all conscious manifestations of sin. While such powerful experiences of sanctification should be common among believers (I John 3:4-6), it seems the more biblical picture of sanctification and transformation is an ongoing process requiring constant care and effort by the believer.

Philippians reminds us to “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling for it is he who is at work in us to do his will,” and “He who began a good work in you will bring it unto completion unto the day of Christ.”

The process view of sanctification leaves little room for spiritual pride. It acknowledges the frailty of the vessel and the supremacy of grace in the cleansing and transformation of the individual.

## **6.2 Perseverance**

The Reformed belief in the perseverance of the saints is seen as a guarantee or assurance that the regenerated person will ultimately be saved, even despite set-backs and failures in their struggle against sin (the sanctification process). An Arminian view sees perseverance as the responsibility of the individual believer, which can be neglected or lost. Thus, in that system, there is no guarantee of salvation for those regenerated by the Spirit. It is contingent upon remaining faithful to the end, though surely that faithfulness is a result of grace in one’s life.

For Reformed believers, perseverance is guaranteed by the intercession and promise of Christ (John 6:37-40), the nature of the New Covenant (Heb. 8:10 ff.), and the nature of the New birth (I Peter 1:23). The Westminster Confession makes a difference between the professed convert, and the genuine believer, and allows for a fall from the faith, but only for false brethren.

As stated in Chapter XVII, “They, whom God hath accepted in His Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.”

This leads to the concept of assurance.

### **6.3 Assurance**

Although hypocrites and other unregenerate men may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favor of God (which hope of theirs shall perish); yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love Him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before Him, may, in this life, be certainly assured that they are in a state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, which hope shall never make them ashamed (Chapter XVIII, para. 1).

This doctrine does leave rooms for struggle and doubt in arriving at the point of assurance, and does not require special revelation to understand one’s standing as being in God’s favor. “This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties, before he be partaker of it. . . .”(para. 3).

One of the doctrines addressing this paradox of assurance as opposed to hypocritical self-confidence has been the doctrine of the visible and invisible church (See glossary).

### **6.4 Good Works**

The great discussion concerning good works centers on whether mankind in himself is able to do works pleasing to God which merit forgiveness or reward. The Reformed doctrine is clearly stated in the Confession:

Their ability to do good works is not at all of themselves, but wholly from the Spirit of Christ. And that they may be enabled thereunto , beside the graces they have already received, there is required an actual influence of the same Holy Spirit to work in them to will, and to do, of His good pleasure: yet they are not hereupon to grow negligent as if they were not bound to perform any duty unless upon a special motion of the Spirit; but they ought to be diligent in stirring up the grace of God that is in them.

They who, in their obedience, attain unto the greatest height which is possible in this life, are so far from being able to supererogate, and to do more than God requires, as that they fall short of much which in duty they are bound to do” (Chapter XVI, 3,4).

The Confession goes onto say that good works, or even repentance never *merits* forgiveness, for that is gained through the cross of Christ alone.

Counter to the Reformation view, the Council of Trent (Roman Catholic Council 100 years prior to the Westminster Assembly), taught that the following propositions were to be held anathema (rejected or condemned):

15. That a man reborn and justified is bound by faith to believe that he is assuredly in the number of the predestinate.

23. That man once justified can no more sin, nor can he lose the grace, and so he that falls into sin was never truly justified; or that it is possible altogether to avoid all sins, even venial sins. . . .

24. That justification once received is not preserved and even increased in the sight of God through good works; but that these same works are only fruits and signs of justification, not causes of its increase (Council of Trent, Session VI, January 1547, in Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 263).

Several comforting benedictions from scripture are the basis of the Reformed view of assurance, perseverance, and sanctification, i.e. the idea that we are saved, kept and growing unto the return of Christ.

*May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it (I Thess.5:23-4).*

*May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen (Heb. 13:20-1).*

*To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our savior be glory , majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen (Jude 25-5).*

### **Discussion Questions:**

Does emphasis on sanctification as a process, rather than a completed experience leave room for excuses for sinful behavior?

Is the doctrine of entire sanctification accurate? Why or why not?

Does the Reformed doctrine of perseverance give comfort to those who live in conscious disobedience to the revealed will of God? Why or why not?

Is the statement of the Catholic Council of Trent (16<sup>th</sup> century) that one cannot know if they are among the number of the elect correct in your view?

### Readings for Chapter Six

Henry Bettenson, ed. "Canons on Justification, Anathemas" in *Documents of the Christian Church*, Second Edition, London: Oxford University Press, 1963, 263.

Wayne Grudem. "Sanctification (Growth in Likeness to Christ)" in *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994, 746-762.

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R.E O. White "Perseverance," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter Elwell, ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984.

### Glossary

**Anti-nomianism:** This is the view that salvation by grace meant that Christians were free from observing the constraints of any moral law. The word literally means "against law." Gnostics and others who took this false view of grace believed licentious behavior was permissible since spirit and matter are incompatible, and what we do in the body is of no spiritual significance. Paul addressed an early form of this belief in Romans 6:1-2. "Shall we go on sinning that grace may abound? By no means."

**Assurance:** The conviction of the believer in Jesus Christ that despite his sinful condition he is a child of God, forgiven of sins, and an heir of heaven through the finished work of Christ.

**Entire Sanctification:** The belief that one is entirely free from the power of sin in one's life and is able to live in a state of freedom from all known sin.

**Perseverance:** The doctrine that the regenerated believer in Christ will ultimately be saved despite moral failures, lapses, or doubts in this life. Perseverance (ultimate salvation) is guaranteed by God's promises, the nature of the New Covenant, and new birth. For Reformed believers it is rooted in the doctrines of election and pre-destination

**Sanctification:** The cleansing or setting apart of the believer from sin to God. It includes the experience of continued growth in Christ -likeness and purification of the believer's life through the blood, name and word of Christ and is a function of the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life.

**Visible Church:** This refers to the members who are identified as part of Christ's Church, and includes both believers and non-believers, truly regenerate, as well as false believers or hypocrites. The visible church is contrasted with the invisible church which is made up of all true believers in Christ from whatever segment of Christ's body. *Nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: 'The Lord knows those who are his,' and, 'Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.'* In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for noble purposes, and some for ignoble. (II Tim. 2:19-20).

**Works of supererogation:** The Roman Catholic belief in good works which go beyond what God requires (Luke 10:35), and can be stored up to the benefit of others. These benefits include merit for the removing of persons from purgatory.

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## **7. How should we worship? (Westminster Confession, Chapters twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty, thirty-one)**

### **7.1 Statements of the Confession on Worship**

Chapter XXI carries several statements about worship:

But the acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.

Religious worship is to be given to God, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; and to him alone: not to angels, saints, or any other creature: and since the fall, not without a Mediator, nor in the mediation of any other but of Christ alone.

Prayer . . . is to be made . . . in a known tongue.

Prayer is to be made for things lawful . . . but not for the dead (Chapter XX, paragraph 1-4).

Paragraph 5 states the basic format for Reformed worship:

The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear; the sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the word, in obedience unto God with understanding, faith, and reverence; singing of psalms, with grace in the heart; as also the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ; are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God: besides religious oaths, and vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings on special occasions; which are, in their several times and seasons, to be used in an holy and religious manner (Chapter XXI, paragraph 5).

Comment is then made on the place of worship (everywhere, especially in the home), and the setting apart of the Sunday Sabbath as dedicated to the worship of God, and excluding other forms of work or recreation.

Of particular interest in this segment are 1) the references to the use of images, 2) no other mediator than Jesus, 3) prayer offered in a known tongue, and 4) forbidding prayer for the dead. These are all problem issues that Reformed believers have with Catholic patterns of worship.

1) The issue of representation of God in visible, non-biblically sanctioned forms, harks back to the iconoclast (breaking of icons) controversy of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. One class of believers, reacting against the saturation of Orthodox churches with icons forbid their use

in any form and imprisoned those who advocated their use. Some of this activity was in response to the Muslim advance which forbade the use of images in worship. Iconodules (servants of icons) eventually won the day in the seventh ecumenical council, and the use of statues and pictures of Christ and the saints in worship became an accepted permanent practice in Orthodox and Catholic churches. This brief sentence in the confession repudiates that practice.

2) Another issue addressed is that there is only one mediator in worship, that is Christ. This is a repudiation of the Catholic view of the priesthood. This doctrine has a long history in the Catholic faith going back to Ignatius of Antioch and, Catholics would say, to Jesus and the apostles. A foundational doctrine of the reformation was the priesthood of believers. While the Reformers believed in an ordained ministry to administer the public worship of the church, they rejected the idea that a priest was necessary for the individual to approach God, receive the forgiveness of sins, or to worship. The visible ministry existed for the purpose of establishing order in the life and activities of the visible church.

3) Reference to prayer made in a known tongue is reference to the use of Latin in Catholic worship. 4) Mention of prayer for or to the dead is addresses a violation of Protestant views of biblically acceptable prayer.

## **7.2 Old Testament Worship (A brief statement)**

Our understanding of worship in the Old Testament dates back to Genesis. We know Cain and Abel brought offerings to the Lord, and Abraham did the same. Animal sacrifice, tithing to Melchizedek, taking a sacrificial meal with Melchizedek, and following the covenant of circumcision were essential practices of Abraham. The family or clan offering animal sacrifice appears to have been the basic congregational unit, and the patriarch the primary priest (See Job Chapter 1).

Moses established a more elaborate system of corporate worship under the covenant at Sinai which included, tithing, feasts (calendar), animal sacrifice, various sacrificial meals, a detailed ceremonial law, a tribal (Levitical) priesthood, vestments, and required the ministry of a high priest.

The ark of the covenant, the tent of meeting, and later the temple in Jerusalem gave worship a central location for the community of the faithful. With the destruction of the temple, the synagogue, or local gathering, became a primary place of corporate worship. Synagogue worship followed a loose, but established pattern of prayers, psalms, readings, sermon, and benedictions. The rabbi would also perform ceremonies required by the law such as circumcision. Many see the influence of the synagogue in the New Testament patterns of worship and polity. (For instance, R.T Beckwith in "The Jewish Background to Christian Worship," in *The Study of Liturgy*).

### 7.3 New Testament Worship (A Brief Statement)

The pattern which most deeply affected worship in the time of the New Testament was that of the synagogue. Jesus worshipped in synagogues regularly. Paul always addressed the synagogue congregation if there was one, in each new town. The synagogue, governed by elders, had a basic liturgy mentioned above. Add to that the charismatic dimension of spontaneous prayer, tongues, prophecy, psalms, hymns, and lengthy teaching (even putting some to sleep! Acts 20:7f., I Cor. 14:1ff.) we get a kind of free form synagogue service among New Testament Christians.

Paul allows the observance, or non-observance of the Sabbath (Rom. 14:2-6), great latitude in observing food laws, but warns against embracing the Old Testament system of keeping an elaborate church calendar. *Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration, or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come, the reality, however, is found in Christ. Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize*” (Col. 16-18a). And in Galatians: *But now that you know God – or rather are known by God – how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you*” (Gal. 4:9-10).

The Jewish believers in Jerusalem did observe Temple rites and vows: *Then they said to Paul: ‘You see brother how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law . . . so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow. Take these men, join in their purification rites, and pay their expenses so they can have their heads shaved. Then everybody will know there is no truth in these reports about you . . .* (Acts 21:20-24). But this is nowhere encouraged for non-Jewish believers.

### 7.4 Distinctions between the Old and New Testaments

The Confession states that all requirements peculiar to the Old Testament system of worship are no longer binding for New Testament Christians.

Besides this law, commonly called moral, God was pleased to give the people of Israel, as a church under age, ceremonial laws, containing several typical ordinances, partly of worship, prefiguring Christ, His graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits: and partly, holding forth diverse instructions of moral duties. All which ceremonial laws are now abrogated, under the new testament (Chapter XIX, para. 3).

## 7.5 Developments in the Liturgy

It seems the post-apostolic church developed a sophistication and detail in its liturgy that resembles the temple system and its priesthood, but abandons the simplicity and spontaneity of the synagogue service and the practice of the New Testament Church (for instance, that seen in I Corinthians 14:1ff.).

The New Testament Church, and the early patristic church, practiced a love feast along with its Eucharist. Fellowship, worship, prayer, charismatic gifts, and teaching seem to have been primary in the primitive church. Attention to form and ritual were probably minimal.

The communion, along with Scripture-based teaching was central to the corporate gathering. Eventually, the practice of praying over the communion became the central act of the worship service and a liturgy was built around this aspect of the gathering. (See Owen Chadwick on “Worship and Art”). The *epiclesis* (Gr. for calling upon) was eventually seen as a kind of “magic moment” in the service transubstantiating the bread and wine into the actual body and blood of Christ which was then elevated for all to adore. Various liturgical elements were added around this action and became set in stone as “the way” to worship (do liturgy), and to be repeated each time the church gathered with some variations. Such rote methods of worship could not be further from New Testament practice, and tend to make worship a mechanical exercise rather than an encounter with the Living God. On the other hand, corporate worship which has no definition often lacks a sense of form, beauty or intelligence.

The sacraments of communion, baptism, confirmation, penance, and marriage all came to be performed in the context of worship (whether large or small gatherings), and were always part of the liturgy. Protestants did away with five of the seven sacraments and tend to emphasize the role of Scripture and preaching as opposed to the sacraments or other liturgical forms. This is less true in some “high church” traditions.

There is also the question of the church calendar. These are the regularly practiced feasts and services of the church. These include Sunday worship, Holy Week observances, Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost, Advent and the Lenten fast. The calendar of the early church developed many feasts and observances such as martyr’s feast days and Holy Days to be observed by the whole church. This is in contrast to the relatively simple practices of the apostolic church.

With regard to vestments, Justin Martyr is the first church Father to speak of donning special garb as a Christian. He wore the philosopher’s gown as a way of showing that Christianity was a superior philosophy. This had nothing to do with liturgical function. Distinctive vestments did become a mainstay of the clergy by the 5<sup>th</sup> century, and remain so in some communions today. Most contemporary churches reject vestments and actually seem to glorify casual and undistinguished dress. The author of *Bruchko*, a missionary to a remote South American Indian tribe, tells a humorous story of Indians who had been taught to wear coat and tie after conversion to Christ, provoking

speculation that this was the core meaning of Christianity. I doubt that the need to adopt peculiar dress was ever the essence of Christ's message.

## 7.5 Developments in Music and Art

Music and art developed early in the life and practice of the church (See Chadwick). Of course, the psalms were always a part of the corporate worship of the people of Israel. Creative forms of song were practiced by many early church fathers and were cited even among gnostic sects as early as Philo of Alexandria – contemporary of Paul. Simple early art forms developed into elaborate iconography by the fifth century. Both pictures and statues were used to enhance worship, and according to some subverted worship, redirecting it to the idolatrous veneration of images. The iconoclastic controversy of the 8<sup>th</sup> century (see Leith, “The Image Ocntroversy”) addressed the question of the role of art in worship.

By the middle ages sophisticated iconography was the norm in Orthodox churches. The Renaissance period saw the development of extremely elaborate musical productions as the basis for worship services or productions requiring the participation of highly trained composers, musicians and choirs. Bach's St. Matthew's Passion, Masses, and Requiems by various composers are examples.

## 7.6 Our Church's Stance

Where does our church stand on issues such as liturgy, church calendar, use of art in worship? Staunton Grace Covenant and Grace Presbytery (a.k.a. Grace Network) are among the churches traditionally known as Free Churches. The term comes from the fact that such churches have refused regulation and entanglement with state institutions in the past. They also tend to avoid many of the practices of the churches with longstanding traditions, and attempt to be entirely biblical in their practice of the Christian faith, including methods of corporate worship. Since our churches are all less than a generation old, we lack policy statements on many questions of this sort. Like Free Churches of the past, we tend to pick and choose what we feel is edifying and biblically based.

That is not to say there are no guiding principles. *We observe commonly regarded Christian feasts* of Christmas, Easter, Advent, and Palm Sunday – much like the primitive post-apostolic church. We are not obligated to observe such festivals, but feel their observance in this culture enhances rather than diminishes effective worship. In another culture (say a mission to an Islamic society) such observances may be dispensed with as diminishing true worship in that culture. *We do not wear vestments*. While we do not condemn their use by others, they are considered entirely unnecessary for worship and actually tend to create an unbiblical distinction between ordained ministers and the rest of Christ's congregation. We use some forms of art, such as painting, drama (an anathema in ancient times, incidentally), and music (mostly contemporary), but tend to reject the use of statues because of traditional Protestant concerns about the idolatry of their veneration. We do not practice and epiclesis or mass in our communion service, and hold

to a fairly standard Protestant form of liturgy (though many charismatics won't admit this). That is, our corporate worship consists of song, reading scripture, prayer, preaching, and perhaps testimony, prophecy, and a fellowship meal. Except for the lack of a weekly communion service, the elements of our worship services are a contemporary expression of the historic Christian faith.

In short, we have great freedom to choose our mode of corporate worship, as long as it does not contradict the Bible, and assists the congregation in drawing near to the Living God. It is His presence or absence that marks whether we have truly worshipped or not – the form is entirely secondary, except to the extent it enhances our ability to draw near to Him.

### **Discussion Questions:**

How does one's view of the Irenaeus' Rule of Faith affect the way they would view things like liturgy and the church calendar? (The Rule of Faith established both Scripture and tradition as sources of truth).

Is the observance of feasts like Lent and Advent in violation of the Colossians 2 passage quoted above?

Should we insist that ordained elders always preside at communion services? Why or why not?

Is having a published order of service a violation of I Corinthians 14?

Does the use of candles or an advent wreath in worship services have Scriptural warrant? Should they be used? Why or why not?

When is religious art acceptable as an expression of faith or worship? On what do you base your answer?

### **Readings:**

Owen Chadwick. "Worship and Art," in *The Early Church*. New York: Penguin Books, 1967.

John a Lasco. "The Abolition of Vestments," in *The Reformation of the Church*. Iain Murray, ed. London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965.

John Leith, ed. "The Image Controversy," in *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, Third Edition. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982.

Geoffrey Wainwright. "Periods of Liturgical History," in *The Study of Liturgy*, Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold, eds. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

## Glossary

**Adiaphora:** Those expressions of faith or liturgy which are considered to be neutral in their significance as being neither commanded nor forbidden by Scripture. Adiaphora may be performed or not according to the conscience of the person or community without jeopardizing the faith of the performers.

**Advent:** A season in the church calendar which marks a period of preparation for celebration of the incarnation (first advent or coming of Christ), but also looks toward the second advent or coming of Christ. In the western church Advent begins on the Sunday closest to November 30 and is the beginning of the ecclesiastical calendar for the new church year.

**Anaphora:** The central Prayer of the Eucharistic liturgy. (The Concise Dictionary of the Christian Church, Elizabeth Livingstone, ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 19).

**Church Calendar:** The regularly practiced feasts and services of the church. These include Sunday worship, Holy Week Observance, Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost, Lenten fast. The calendar of the early church developed many feasts and observances in contrast to the relatively simple practices of the apostolic church.

**Easter:** One of the first feasts of the church, which in addition to regular Sunday worship was observed in memory of the resurrection of Christ. Originally its date was based on the Passover observance of Judaism, but later, to keep the observance on Sunday (resurrection day) was changed to a strictly Christian observance always falling on a Sunday.

**Epiclesis:** From Greek for “calling upon,” it came to signify the part of the service when the presbyter calls the Holy Spirit to transform the elements of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. In most traditions, the communion could not be celebrated without and epiclesis. The term also refers to the calling upon the Holy Spirit to fill and empower a candidate in the process of ordination.

**Iconostasis:** An ornate screen erected around the altar which separates the priest from the laity, particularly during the epiclesis and other preparations of the communion elements. The iconostasis is a settled tradition in the Eastern Orthodox Churches.

**Holy Week:** The week beginning with Palm Sunday which commemorates Christ’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Last Supper, Agony in the Garden, Trial, Passion, Crucifixion and Resurrection. Many churches, especially liturgical churches, commemorate the week with special services.

**Lent:** In the western and Eastern churches a period of fasting prior to the Easter celebration was practiced. This period was gradually extended to include a forty day period analogous to Christ' forty day wilderness fast.

**Liturgy:** From the Greek word for worship, it has come to mean the form or order of a religious service. Liturgy may include prayers, songs, proclamation (preaching), the reading of Scripture and various other acts and traditional forms. Liturgy in the Christian Church, both East and West, experienced a definite development through the centuries.

**Nativity:** An early feast of the church celebrating the incarnation, the birth of Christ through the virgin Mary. Due to the differences in the Julian and Gregorian calendars the Eastern Orthodox celebrate the feast on January 6, the Western Church on December 25.

**Pentecost:** The feast of ingathering in the Old Testament Jewish calendar. Meaning fifty, it is the feast which came fifty days after the feast of first fruits and was the feast being observed by Jews in Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit was poured out on Christ's disciples. It was later observed by the church as a feast fifty days after Easter Sunday commemorating the outpouring of the Spirit.

**Sacrament:** A classic definition of sacrament is an outward signs instituted by Christ to give grace. The Roman and Orthodox Catholic Churches came to recognize seven sacraments: Baptism, Communion, Confirmation, Penance, Holy Orders, Matrimony, Anointing of the sick (Last anointing).

**Sunday Worship:** There is evidence in the Bible and early church documents that the church has chosen Sunday, the first day of the week and the day of Christ's resurrection, as the principal day for the corporate worship of the Christian church since its inception. The Westminster Confession enjoined the observance of a Sunday Sabbath on the followers of the Reformed faith.

**Vestments:** The distinctive garments worn by members of the clergy, especially in liturgical churches. Their use dates to Roman and Greek antiquity and is patterned after common garments of the time. "It originated in the ordinary clothes of antiquity and developed into a specifically priestly costume between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, largely because the laity abandoned the use of long tunics and mantles" (The Concise Dictionary of the Christian Church, Elizabeth Livingstone, ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 537). The use of vestments was a significant controversy during the early stages of the English Reformation.

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## 8. What is the Church?

(Westminster Confession, Chapters twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight, thirty-one, thirty-two, thirty-three)

### 8.1 Definition

The Confession states:

The catholic or universal Church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all.

The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the whole world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.

The purest Churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated as to become no Churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan. Nevertheless, there shall always be a Church on earth to worship God according to His will. (Chapter XXV, para. 1,2,5)

The Reformed understanding of Church consists of the entire community of God's people from both the Old and New Testament eras. The collective people of God are often referred to as the congregation or assembly (*qahal* in Hebrew, *ekklesia* in Greek). The concept and government of the people of God changes in the New Testament from the nation of Israel to the "called out" people of God. These come from among every nation, kindred, people, and tongue, or in Greek, *ta ethne*, or the ethnic groups, i.e. the nations. In the New Testament the church consists of those effectually called by God for salvation.

Several biblical concepts are applied to the church from the words of Christ, and the apostles. Christ said he would build his church upon a rock against which the gates of hell would not prevail. The believers are referred to as a priesthood or children of God indicating equal access to the presence of God for all Christians.

In Ephesians the church is referred to as the body of Christ with Christ as the head, the temple of God inhabited by the Spirit with Christ as the chief cornerstone, the family of God, the Bride of Christ, and the members are referred to as soldiers in an army. These are spiritual metaphors for the relationship between believers and Christ, and between and among believers. A physical building is never referred to as a church in the New Testament.

Officers of the church are generally believed to have been taken from the synagogue model with other emphases specifically taken from the teachings of Christ and the

apostles. These include pastors (those who shepherd and care for Christ's people), elders (from the word for mature, indicating age and spiritual maturity, good judgment), and bishop (episkopos or overseer, one who looks over with the intention of expressing care or concern). The New Testament seems to use these terms interchangeably, though these terms later take on different meanings.

New Testament churches were generally founded by apostles and guided by a local council of elders. The apostolically founded churches tended to form into regional churches which related together. In cases of conflict, doctrinal or practical questions they came together in councils, the first of which is the Jerusalem Council, Acts 15. Today's New Testament churches recognize the five-fold ministry of Ephesians four – apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher. The post-apostolic church tended to give new designations to some of these offices.

Later doctrines of the church made the believing community the custodian of the means of grace for salvation. This was particularly true for churches embracing a priestly, sacramental view of the distribution of God's grace. Eventually, this led to the belief that the church must have a visible administrative unity in order to be valid. Thus, the Catholic system was born.

Church discipline, the remission of sins, the exclusion or re-instatement of members was often carried out by public confession or *exomologesis* which was administered by the bishop. Its origin is taken from the sequence for repentance and restoration found in Matthew 18.

## **8.2 Post-apostolic developments**

In the time of Ignatius of Antioch (c. 107), a three-tiered system of church government was developed which deeply affected the future church. Ignatius separated the office of bishop, presbyter and deacon into three separate orders. For a church to exist a single (monarchical) bishop was required, and there was only to be one per city. The presbyters, or priests, served as a college (collective or group) under the direction of the bishop in a given region. The deacons served the bishop and the church in its ministries of practical mercy.

In this system, before the canon of the New Testament was finally formed, the bishop became the guarantor of the unity and doctrinal purity of the church. The selection of the bishop was safeguarded by the process known as apostolic succession.

The North African bishop, Cyprian of Carthage, established the concepts of the administrative unity of the church and insisted on communion with the Catholic bishop of a city as a criterion for salvation. Other churches and splinter groups could not give what they did not have, according to Cyprian. All of these developments spawned a system of administration known as diocese headed by bishops. These diocese formed administrative units in ascending order which culminated in five primary patriarchates – Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. The claim of the Roman bishop to

a status supreme to the other patriarchs was a source of severe friction and eventually rupture with the other (Orthodox) patriarchates.

Other patriarchs were willing to concede a *primus inter pares* (first among equals) status to the bishop of Rome, but refused to recognize his universal supremacy over the church. The other patriarchs tended to work collegially and endorse the conciliar method of church governments which looked to church councils rather than a single bishop to establish doctrinal, polity, and practical policy precedent. These councils along with papal decrees, etc. form what is known as canon law, the basis for policy and doctrine in Catholic and Orthodox churches.

### **8.3 Reformation developments**

In addition to the doctrinal changes brought on by the Reformation, changes in the understanding of the nature of the Church came into play. The Reformation marks of the church were true preaching of the Word of God, the proper administration of the sacraments, and the true exercise of church discipline. This removed apostolic succession and administrative unity as true marks of validity.

Several new views of church government came into being. In addition to the episcopal system, the Presbyterian and congregational forms became prominent. Presbyterian government removed the office of bishop and placed authority in the local council of elders (presbyters), and established regional councils known as Presbyteries in ascending order to include the synod and General or National Assembly. Congregation (or Independent) church government recognized no governing authority beyond the local church – either the congregation or the session.

#### **Discussion Questions:**

What do you think of the ancient saying, “There is no salvation outside the church”?

The Confession states that Churches exist in various states of purity or corruption, and some even become synagogues of Satan. When does a church become so corrupt that it becomes necessary to leave? What is the value of staying in a church with a significant degree of corruption?

What is the error of groups like the Latter Day Saints which claim there was no church in existence since the church of the pre-Constantine era?

What kind of governing system does your church function under?

Many contemporary expressions of the New Testament church claim to be more faithful to the biblical revelation of church than their predecessors of earlier ages. Do you think they are right?

How do you understand the terms “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic” in the Apostles’ Creed?

Should young children (infants) be baptized into the community of the faithful? Why or why not and on what basis?

Is the word church synonymous with kingdom in the New Testament?

### **Readings for Chapter Eight**

Louis Berkhof. "The Government of the Church," in *Readings in Christian Theology*, Vol. 3. Millard Erickson, ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979.

Wayne Grudem. "The Church: Its Nature, Its Marks, and Its Purposes," in *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1994, 853-1090.

Carl Henry. "The Perils of Independency," in *Readings in Christian Theology*, Vol. 3. Millard Erickson, ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979.

\_\_\_\_\_ "The Perils of Ecumenicity," in *Readings in Christian Theology*, Vol. 3.

Leon Morris, "The Nature and Government of the Church (Episcopalian View)," in *Readings in Christian Theology*, Vol. 3. Millard Erickson, ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979.

### **Glossary**

**Church Government:** The means by which churches manage their affairs and make decisions. Generally church government falls into one of three categories: episcopal, presbyterian, or congregational.

**Congregational:** Congregational church government tends to see the membership of the church as the seat of earthly authority in the church, and all tasks, offices, or authority is delegated to officeholders by congregational vote.

**Council:** Councils of bishops have been gathered throughout the history of the church to address various questions of Christian dogma and church practice. The great ecumenical Councils such as Nicea, Chalcedon, and Constantinople have been the better known in Church history, but there have been many others as well. The most recent was the Second Vatican Council. Councils are generally seen to supplement papal or episcopal authority in Catholic and Orthodox systems.

**Episcopal:** This term comes from the Greek word for bishop (*episkopos*). It denotes a form of government which places primary authority in the hands of a bishop who is seen as a successor of Christ's apostles. The bishop has great latitude to delegate various responsibilities to other members of the ordained clergy or the congregation.

**Free Church:** This denotes a group of Protestant churches which tend to be non-liturgical and to have histories which resisted excessive entanglements with state control.

Many recent and contemporary Protestant movements today could be seen as being in the Free Church tradition.

**John Hus:** A follower of John Wycliff, Hus was from Prague in Bohemia. He was martyred for his pre-Protestant beliefs limiting papal power, and encouraging the participation of the laity in the life of the church.

**John Wycliff:** A leading pre-Reform figure in England. He taught that the Bible was the sole criterion for doctrine, the doctrine of the papacy was not established in Scripture, and refuted the teaching of transubstantiation.

**Metropolitan:** A bishop of a major city with authority to appoint bishops of smaller cities and regions in the Orthodox episcopal system.

**Papacy:** The institution named for the bishop of Rome. This became the leading patriarchate in the old Catholic system and later became the source of much contention both in the wider church and state.

**Patriarch:** A bishop of one of the five leading churches of Christendom – Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem.

**Presbyterian:** From the Greek word for elder. The system of church government which establishes the seat of decision-making authority for the church in a body of elders. Local churches generally have a session (group of elders) and there are graduated regional courts with greater decision making authority. These include the regional Presbytery, synod, and in large churches the General or National Assembly.

**Priest:** A presbyter in the old Catholic system. One who is under episcopal authority and has the power to perform the epiclesis in the mass and forgive or retain sins in confession.

**Protestant:** The movement in the 16<sup>th</sup> century which protested the doctrine and governing practices of the Roman Catholic Church. Some famous leaders of the Protestant Reformation include Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, Martin Bucer, Menno Simons and many others. The watchwords of the Reformation were that salvation is solely by faith, solely by grace and solely by Scripture. It also emphasized the priesthood of all believers as opposed to a priesthood with special status in the church.

**Reformed:** The beliefs and church polity (government) characteristic of the Reformers, but especially the branch of the Reformation led by John Calvin.

**Synod:** A gathering of church leaders on a regional basis for the purpose of deciding questions of belief or practice in the church.

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## **9. What about Church and State? (Westminster Confession, Chapters twenty-three, twenty-four twenty-five, twenty-six)**

### **9.1 The Confession on the Civil Order**

When we speak of the state we often use the term “civil order.” One dictionary definition for the word civil in this sense is “Of ordinary community life as distinguished from the military or the ecclesiastical” (The American Heritage Dictionary). The Old Testament community of Israel was a theocracy, and the affairs we normally assign to the civil order were also matters of concern for the religious establishment. The priests in this system often acted as judges and interpreters of the law of Moses. Because of this the Westminster Confession states that some of the provisions of the Old Testament law pertained to the civil order within that theocracy. “To them also, as a body politic, He gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people; not obliging any other now, further than general equity thereof may require” (XIX, 4). So the Confession recognizes Israel’s special status as a theocracy, but does not endorse the concept that the theocracy is normative or required outside or after that kingdom.

Chapter XXIII of the Confession deals with the question of the civil magistrate. Among other things it insists on the validity, necessity, and God-ordained nature of the civil government. It recognizes the right of the government to bear arms and to wage war “upon just and necessary occasion” (XXIII, 2). This chapter also forbids the state the authority to interfere with the affairs of the church, or the church (particularly the papal system) to deprive men of “dominions, or lives, if he shall judge them to be heretics, or upon any other pretense whatsoever” (XXIII, 4).

These statements of the Confession touch on age-old questions in the theology of Church-State relations. Two of these are the issue of just war and the concept of church inquisition against heresy, or using the arm of the state as a means of punishing heretics. More on these in a later section.

### **9.2 Some Biblical Statements on Civil Order**

One of the earliest statements in scripture concerning the civil order is found at the time of the covenant of renewal found in Genesis in the time of Noah. “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man” (Gen. 9:6 NIV). Many commentators take this as a reference to establishing the practice of capital punishment, and the first reference in the Old Testament to a function of civil government.

At the establishment of the nation of Israel by covenant on Mt. Sinai, the people of Israel were referred to as a kingdom of priests, a holy nation (Ex. 19:6), and the covenant nation was established under a theocracy. During the time of the apostasy of the people as outlined in the book of Judges, it was the Lord who repeatedly raised up deliverers for the

people, thus revealing his kingship over the Israel. As the Lord spoke to Samuel when the people sought another, visible king: “[I]t is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king” (I Sam. 8:7). This statement reveals Yahweh’s role in the civil order of Israel.

But the Israelites did not live solely under a theocracy or messianic king. This was especially evident in the time of the exile (586 B.C and after). The books of Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther depict life for the Jews under Babylonian and Persian rule. Of particular interest are two passages dealing with “church-state” relations. The first is Daniel 3:29. After the miracle of the fiery furnace, Nubchadnezzar, in ancient autocratic oriental fashion makes a “church-state” decree respecting an establishment of religion. *Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save this way.* At a later date, Nehemiah secures the legal and material support of King Artaxerxes for his expedition to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls of the city. *I also said to him, ‘If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe conduct until I arrive in Judah? And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the king’s forest, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?’ And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests.* (Nehemiah 2:7-8).

Unencumbered by restrictions on state-sponsored religion, the kings were free to decree how they would relate to the community of believers. In fact, most ancient rulers were legitimized by a temple or priestly cult including Egypt (Re), Babylon (Marduk) and Persia. Cyrus the Persian issued a decree in 538 B.C. allowing all captive peoples to return to their homeland and restore the worship of their gods. This decree was discovered in the last century on a stone artifact known as the cylinder of Cyrus, which contains the words of the decree. This included Israel’s commission to rebuild the temple and re-establish temple worship of Yahweh.

Jesus was asked a question by the religious leaders of his time concerning taxes. The question was intended to trap him on one side of the current debate on Jewish attitudes toward Roman occupation. His answer indicated that both God and Caesar had their proper claims on the allegiance and property of believers.

Both Paul and Peter address the issue of civil government as well. Romans 13 is the classic biblical statement on Christian attitudes toward civil rulers, even hostile ones. It establishes the legitimacy of civil government and states the believer’s duty toward it. *Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves . . . For he is God’s servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer”* (Rom. 13:1-2,4).

In similar fashion Peter states the following: *Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king as to the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right* (I Peter 2:13-14).

In Acts the apostles show that there is a limit to obedience to earthly rule: *Then they (the Sanhedrin) called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, 'Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.'* (Acts 4:18-20).

### **9.3 Early State Persecution of Christianity**

The earliest state-sponsored persecution of Christians came from the Sanhedrin (overseers of Jewish interests in Roman Palestine). They questioned or imprisoned the apostles on repeated occasions (Acts 4:1 ff., 5:17 ff., 6: 11ff.). Finally, the Sanhedrin stoned Stephen, and Saul of Tarsus conducted an official persecution of the Christians attempting to go as far as Damascus with letters of authorization for the high priest (Acts 7: 54 ff., 9:1 ff.).

James was beheaded and Peter imprisoned by Herod Agrippa (Acts 12: 1-4). Paul and his co-workers were detained or imprisoned on several occasions by local or Roman authorities (Acts 16:22 ff., Acts 22:24 ff.).

Here's what the church historian Eusebius tells us about the martyrdom of Peter and Paul:

The Roman Tertullian is likewise a witness of this. He writes as follows: 'Examine your records. There you will find that Nero was the first that persecuted this doctrine, particularly then when after subduing all the east, he exercised his cruelty against all at Rome. We glory in having such a man the leader in our punishment. For whoever knows him can understand that nothing was condemned by Nero unless it was something of great excellence.' Thus publicly announcing himself as among the first of God's chief enemies, he was led on to the slaughter of the apostles. It is, therefore, recorded that Paul was beheaded in Rome itself, and that Peter was likewise crucified under Nero. This account of Peter and Paul is substantiated by the fact that their names are preserved in the cemeteries of that place even to the present day" (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book II, xxv, 4-5).

Other emperors after Nero continued the official persecution of the believers.

#### **9.4 Post-Apostolic, Pre-Constantinian**

One of the earliest documents addressing the question of the treatment of Christians by Roman authorities is found in the correspondence between Pliny and Trajan. In it a course of legal action to be taken against Christians is outlined. Many of the early Christians were persecuted because they refused to engage in the practice of emperor worship. Cyprian, and many other Christian martyrs were killed for their refusal to engage in these rites of worship which they considered to be idolatrous.

Many brutal official persecutions continued up through the reign of Diocletian (d. 313). With the Edict of Toleration (311 A.D.) and the Edict of Milan (313) under Emperor Constantine, Christianity went from being a persecuted faith to being *religio licita* or a legal religion. It eventually became the dominant and sometimes only favored religion of the empire.

#### **9.5 Constantine and the State Establishment of the Christian Faith**

One of the first changes in church-state relations is reflected in Constantine's participation in the Arian controversy. It was he who called the First Council at Nicea. He recognized that the peace and unity of the empire was tied in with the peace and unity of the Catholic Church. A heresy like this one, which bitterly divided the Church could not be ignored. So the Council was called by the emperor to resolve the dispute.

Constantine was enlisted by bishops in North Africa to intervene in the Donatist controversy which eventually became a violent and schismatic conflict. The emperors also were involved in endorsing Arian or Nicene Christianity alternately in the period following Constantine and the first council.

Almost a century later, in the late fourth and early fifth century Augustine, bishop of Hippo in North Africa, continued to struggle with the Donatist Schism. It was he who validated the idea of state punishment of heretics, both to protect his own party and to compel the schismatics to return to the true faith and Church. This decision to use state power to punish heresy was to have profound effect on the future of Church-State relations in the west.

After Rome, the "Eternal City" was sacked by Vandal tribes in 410, the people were shaken and believed that this crisis had arisen because the Romans had forsaken their traditional gods. Rome had been sacked by Alaric in 410, and Northern Africa was falling to the Visigoths at the time of Augustine's death. In the classic of western civilization, *The City of God*, Augustine dealt with the hard theological questions of the relations between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world. He emphasized the temporal nature of the latter. Government was an instrument given to the fallen world to restrain corruption. Believers have dual citizenship and while the city of man is visible, the city of God often is not. Augustine saw Christians as bearing a responsibility to assist in preserving order through participation in the State, including military service and

holding public offices or judgeships. This was a departure from the Church's practice prior to Constantine.

One of the questions Augustine addressed had to do with waging war in light of gospel teachings. He developed what has come to be known as Just War Theory. This theory was later re-stated by medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas and deeply influences western thinking about state engagement in warfare even today.

Some of Augustine's guidelines for the conduct of the just war: a) Is there just cause? (a clear injury needing redress); b) Has every reasonable attempt been made to redress without bloodshed? c) Is the war declared by a legitimate authority? (no vigilanteism or terrorism); d) How is the war fought? (i.e. against military as opposed to civilian targets); e) Is the damage incurred likely less than the prior injury? f) Is success likely? Does the good outweigh the bad? (Eerdmans Handbook to the History of Christianity, p. 24).

There were numerous emperors who deeply influenced the church and vice versa. The code of Justinian (6<sup>th</sup> century) firmly established Orthodox Christianity in Byzantium (Constantinople). In the East the Emperors chose or affirmed the appointment of major bishops and intervened in church affairs even calling Church councils. The emperor's power over the church in the east came to be known as Caesaro-papism. In the West a different scenario unfolded. With the decline of the western empire, the bishop of Rome became the stabilizing figure in western Europe, eventually encompassing both spiritual and earthly power. The Holy Roman Empire was founded with the crowning of Charlemagne on Christmas Day, 800. All western emperors were then beholden to the bishop of Rome as the legitimator of their earthly power. This arrangement was challenged in various ways throughout the middle Ages. (See excursus on "The Rise of the Papacy").

One of the more remarkable and difficult developments in this western system was the institution of the Crusades and the Inquisition. Crusades (Holy War) were declared against the Muslim to regain sites in the Holy Land. Later, under the crusading doctrine the inquisition was established as crusades not against Muslims, but heretics within the realm of Christian (read Catholic) emperors and kings. The arm of the state, in keeping with Augustine's dictum, was used to punish heretics. This led to the Inquisition, a wing of the Crusading movement. Pope Urban II preached the first Crusade after an appeal from Emperor Alexender Comnenus of Constantinople. Those in Clermont, France who heard his first sermon exhorting his hearers to take up arms to liberate the land of the Holy Sepulchre from the violent oppression of its Turkish overlords shouted "*Deus Vult*" or "God wills it."

## **9.6 Reformation and Post-Reformation Developments**

The Protestant Reformation was about doctrine and church polity (church government), but it was also about politics – i.e. the renunciation of the temporal authority of the papacy. The significance of this issue is seen in Luther's writings and developments in Germany as well as in Britain. Significant documents in British history reflect the

relations between church and state in England, culminating in the renunciation of papal authority by Henry VIII who declared himself head of the English Church. This led to the establishment of the Church of England and of the persecution of non-conformist or dissenting Protestants in England. Many of them came to the American colonies for relief.

Several centuries prior to the developments with Henry VIII and the Bishop of Rome, the place of the Church in English society had been enshrined in one of the great documents of western civilization, the Magna Carta or Great Charter of 1215. This charter is considered foundational to the concept of western constitutional democracy. The embattled King John, at the insistence of his nobles, enters into a compact which guarantees rights, liberties and responsibilities to king, nobles, and citizens. In the preamble he states that the undertaking is to the honor of God and the advancement of Holy Church. The first chapter states, in part, “ That the English church shall be free, and shall have her rights entire, and her liberties inviolate; and we will that it be thus observed . . . .” In principle this established the freedom of the church from taxation and interference from the state in the election of clergy in the British system. Reformation and post-Reformation events altered this arrangement as far as governance was concerned with the monarch and parliament exerting constant influence over matters of religion.

One wing of the Reformation, the Anabaptists, repudiated all connection with state established churches and declared principles of freedom or independence from state interference. They were persecuted by Catholic and some Protestant states alike. They also adhered to separatist views regarding participation in public life and state functions. On grounds of conscience they refused to take oaths of allegiance or swear in court. Most were non-violent pacifists and refused military service. The reference to oaths, and legitimate state use of the sword in the Westminster Confession are references to these theological controversies.

The American colonies afforded relief to colonists from the continent, many of whom were members of dissenting groups. One of the earliest such groups to come to these shores was the Pilgrims who landed at Plymouth. As dissenters they came seeking freedom to worship without state restriction and founded their society on the Mayflower Compact.

The experience in England that led these colonists to flee to Holland, then America, is chronicled in William Bradford’s *Of Plymouth Plantation*. As a member of the original party and its second governor, he was uniquely acquainted with the history of the group.

But after these things they could not long continue in any peaceable condition, but were hunted and persecuted on every side, so as their former afflictions were as flea-bitings in comparison of these which now came upon them. For some were taken and clapped up in prison, others had their houses beset and watched night and day, and hardly escaped their hands; and most were fain to flee and leave their houses and habitations, and the means of their livelihood.

Yet these and many other sharper things which afterward befell them were no other than they looked for, and therefore were the better prepared to bear them by the assistance of God's grace and Spirit.

Yet seeing themselves thus molested, and that there was no hope of their continuance there, by a joint consent they resolved to go into the Low Countries where they heard was freedom of religion for all men; as also how sundry from London and other parts of the land had been exiled and persecuted for the same cause, and were gone thither and lived at Amsterdam and in other places of the land (William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, p. 9-10).

Unlike the Plymouth colonists of Massachusetts, those who came to Virginia adhered to the established (Anglican) church. Contention over the favored position of the Episcopal Church in Virginia, requiring attendance at and monetary support of Episcopal Churches led to a revolutionary development. The General Assembly of Virginia passed the Virginia Act for Establishing Religious Freedom in 1786. This act authored by Thomas Jefferson became the basis of the non-establishment clause of the first amendment.

Another significant event in England which occurred some 40 years after the founding of Plymouth Plantation and over a century before the Virginia Act Establishing Religious Freedom was an event known as the Great Ejection where non-conforming Puritans were removed from their pastorates all over England for refusal to subscribe to state-sponsored Anglicanism. Iain Murray writes of the event:

The restoration of Charles II in 1660 brought back into power all those spiritual influences against which the Puritans had stood prior to the Civil Wars. Episcopacy, compulsory liturgy and uniformity in ceremonies were again to be the state religion. A meeting at Savoy in 1661 between Episcopalians and Presbyterians indicated the futility of any hope of accommodation, and rather than comply with the terms of the Act of Uniformity, which was imposed in the following year, some 2,000 Puritans gave up their churches and livings. This Great Ejection of 1662 was one of the most decisive event in the history of English Protestantism, hardening the division between Conformity and Non-Conformity for three centuries to come. (Iain Murray, ed. *The Reformation of the Church*, p. 148).

In America a new era in Church-State relations was introduced -- not secularism, but freedom. According to Jefferson's statute, one's beliefs "shall in nowise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities." Non-establishment does not mean removal of faith, or reference to God, or religious beliefs from the public square. An honest reading of historical documents, especially the inaugural addresses of the Presidents, challenges that notion. It does mean no single belief or denominational system can be recipient of the exclusive support and endorsement of the government.

Another, more recent experiment in church-state relations was the failed Soviet Union with an official policy of atheism. One's beliefs did affect their civil capacities legally. Church life was severely restricted, and many were imprisoned or deprived of life, liberty, and property because of their beliefs.

### **9.7 Excursus: Rise of the Papacy**

The establishment of the institution known as the papacy can only be understood in the context of our earlier discussions. Many factors contribute to the immense ecclesiastical and temporal power eventually exercised by the bishop of Rome. This brief excursus will isolate a few of them. A Catholic view would begin the discussion with Jesus' commission of Peter as the rock upon which the church is built. The Protestant discussion begins a generation later with Clement of Rome and the doctrine of apostolic succession. In Clement's view, himself a bishop or presbyter at Rome, the ministers of the church had been established by Christ or His apostles. Therefore the legitimacy of their office was rooted in the unassailable authority of Christ and His apostles. In addition, Clement, Ignatius, martyr-bishop of Antioch (c. 117), and Polycarp, martyr-bishop of Smyrna, all acknowledge the special place which Rome holds in the life of the Catholic church. As the place where arch-apostles Peter and Paul both ministered and were martyred, it enjoyed the "presidency of love," to quote Ignatius. Eusebius was careful to preserve records of Peter's and Paul's martyrdoms there. Irenaeus (late second century), in his Rule of Faith gave the bishops the role of protectors of the true tradition, and the Roman church, and by implication, the bishop of Rome, final say in matters of dispute regarding the traditions handed down by the apostles though all the bishops.

In addition to belief in apostolic succession and the primacy of the church at Rome, the role of the bishop and apostolic churches play a significant part. Ignatius had posited the concept of the monarchical episcopate – one city, one bishop, one church – as a means of protecting both the unity and doctrinal purity of the church, especially in the age prior to the recognition of the New Testament canon. Lists of bishops who presided in a given church from generation to generation were preserved. Churches founded by apostles took on special importance in this system, since they presumably had the closest association with the original founders. Cyprian's (c. 251) doctrine of the unity of the church, and the role of the bishop in wielding the power of the keys to admit or dismiss penitents further strengthened episcopal power.

The bishop of Rome, as representative of the leading apostolic church, intervened in controversies in Corinth (I Clement), and Asia Minor (the Quartodeciman controversy regarding the proper date for observing Easter). In addition to administrative issues, the Roman bishop addressed the doctrinal concerns of the wider church, sending a representative to Nicea, and later speaking authoritatively to the Christological controversies at Chalcedon.

The canons (conciliar decisions taking on the force of church law) of Nicea and Constantinople reflect a metropolitan system of church administration. Bishops of major

sees exercised archepiscopal oversight of the bishops and churches within their region. The leading apostolic churches became patriarchates. An order of jurisdiction was established by these canons: Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem. The exact meaning of this “pecking order” became a source of contention between the Roman church and the other patriarchates. It is important to note that Constantinople was not of apostolic foundation. The Roman bishop understood his role as primacy – the other patriarchs saw his place as a place of honor, conceding him a place as “first among equals.” The resulting conflict and tension over Roman primacy became a root cause of the eventual schism between the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. The place of the pope in church governance remains a primary impediment to the reunion of these churches today. Some churches, known as Uniate have returned to the Catholic Church through acknowledgement of papal authority, while retaining an Eastern Rite (liturgy, discipline, etc.).

Under Leo (440-461) and later Gregory (590-604), the ecclesiastical and temporal power of the pope increased, especially due to disintegrating conditions in the western empire. The church remained the one institution able to maintain order and stability; its bishop the one official who could command obedience and cooperation from a fractured civil administration and populace.

Some of the following excerpts from Bettenson’s *Document’s of the Christian Church* may illustrate developments for us:

Regarding the deposition of Athanasius, Julius, bishop of Rome writes to the Council of Antioch, 341:

And why were we not written to about the church in Alexandria in particular? Do you not realize that it has been the custom for word to be sent to us first, that in this way just decisions may be arrived at from this place? If therefore any suspicion was directed against the bishop there, word ought to have been sent to the bishop of this place. But they neglected to inform us, and proceeded at their own pleasure and on their own authority; and now they wish to obtain our approval of their decisions, though we never condemned him [Athanasius]. This is not in accordance with the constitutions of Paul or the directions of the traditions of the Fathers. I am informing you of the tradition handed down from the blessed Apostle Peter (Julius, Letter to the Council of Antioch, 341, in *Documents of the Christian Church*, Bettenson, ed.).

Note how Julius presents himself as the spokesmen for the teachings and traditions as handed on by Peter.

An excerpt from a letter of Jerome to Pope Damasus (c. 376):

“I follow no leader save Christ, so I communicate with none save your Beatitude, that is, with the chair of Peter. For this, I know, is the rock on which the Church is built. This is Noah’s ark and he who is not found in it shall perish when the flood overwhelms all” (Jerome in *Documents*).

Later, in 1076, the Pope Gregory VII exercised temporal power over King Henry IV:

Blessed Peter, chief of the apostles, incline thy holy ear to us, I pray and hear me, thy servant, whom from infancy thou hast nourished and till this day hast delivered from the hand of the wicked...especially to me, as thy representative, has been committed, and to me by thy grace has been given by God the power of binding and loosing in heaven and on earth. Relying, then, on this belief, for the honor and defense of thy church and in the name of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, through thy power and authority, I withdraw the government of the whole kingdom of the Germans and of Italy from Henry the King, son of Henry the Emperor. For he has risen up against thy church with unheard of arrogance. And I absolve all Christians from the bond of oath which they have made to him or shall make. And I forbid anyone to serve him as king...(Gregory VII, in *Documents*).

While *church discipline* against erring or violent rulers had been exercised in the past, this exercise of temporal power is extraordinary, but a sign of things to come.

Under Innocent III (c. 1198), the theory of papal power reaches dizzying heights:

The Creator of the universe set up two great luminaries in the firmament of heaven; the greater light to rule the day, the lesser light to rule the night. In the same way, for the firmament of the universal Church, which is spoken of as heaven, he appointed two great dignitaries; the greater to rule over souls (these being, as it were, days), the lesser to bear rule over bodies (those being as it were, nights). These dignities are the pontifical authority and the royal power. Furthermore, the moon derives her light from the sun, and is in truth inferior to the sun in both size and quality, in position as well as effect. In the same way the royal power derives its dignity from the pontifical authority; and the more closely it cleaves to the sphere of that authority the less is the light with which it is adorned;

the further it is removed, the more it increases in splendor  
(Innocent III in *Documents*).

In the west, the power of the papacy continued to increase the power of a single church official. The pope, as the successor of Peter and the Vicar of Christ, increased in both ecclesiastical and temporal power. Papal secular power was rooted in the Holy Roman Empire, established under Charlemagne, crowned emperor by the pope on Christmas day, 800. In the east, a different ethos had taken root. The eastern church is marked by conciliarism, or the authority of councils, and what is known as caesaro-papism. In the east, the emperor often guided the affairs of the church, even approving the choice of candidates in influential episcopal sees. This, in contrast to the continual elevation of the papacy helped create conditions leading to the Great Schism.

### **Discussion Questions**

Do you think the kind of persecution faced by the early church was beneficial to its spiritual vitality? Why or why not?

Did the establishment of the Christian religion create a corrupt church system?

What do you think of Augustine's concept of punishing heresy with the arm of the state?

How do you read the first amendment to the Constitution? What does separation of Church and state mean to you?

Is it possible to understand the concept of non-establishment without knowing the historical context of church-state relations in western Europe?

Should Christians be involved in politics, bear arms, hold public office, or advocate for specific legislation?

How does the democratic system as opposed to the empire or monarchy of the apostles' time affect the way Christians relate to civil government?

Does Jesus' teaching on turning the other cheek require states to be pacifist? Is it wrong for a Christian to serve in the armed forces? Does your country permit believers to be pacifist?

Do you think that in today's climate one's beliefs can in Jefferson's words "affect their civil capacities"?

### **Readings for Chapter Nine**

Pliny and Trajan  
Edict of Toleration, Edict of Milan

Constantine on Donatism  
Crowning of Pepin and Charlemagne  
Gregory VII's *Dictatus*  
Mayflower Compact  
Virginia Statute on Religious Freedom  
First Amendment  
God and Caesar

## **Glossary**

**Caesaro-Papism:** This describes the power of the emperor over the affairs of the church including polity and doctrine. It has tended to be a feature of Eastern (Byzantine) Orthodoxy.

**Crusades:** A series of military expeditions against Muslim overlords of sites considered holy to Christendom. The crusades were approved by the papacy and offered spiritual advantages to those who engaged in them. They were later used to fend off Ottoman encroachment into the lands and realms of Christian emperors. Crusades were also waged against heretics. This use of state power to defend or advance church interests led to the Inquisition.

**Edict of Milan:** An edict established under Constantine in 313 A.D. affording freedom of worship to adherents of the Christian faith.

**Donatist Controversy:** A controversy in the North African church which arose around the year 304 and involved questions of the validity of ordination performed by fallen bishops. The disputants appealed to Constantine for a resolution. After nearly a century of conflict in the North African Church which sometimes became violent, Augustine endorses the use of state power to coerce the schismatics back into the catholic fold. This use of state power to address questions of belief led to similar practices in later history.

**Inquisition:** This was the use of state power to punish heresy through the use of ecclesiastical courts.

**Just War:** The doctrine formulated by Augustine that there were certain circumstances in which state power could justly be used to wage war. His system provided specific guidelines for judging the legitimacy of state use of military action.

**Lay Investiture:** The practice of appointment to clerical office in the church by wealthy layman, usually nobles or kings. This practice provoked bitter disputes between bishops and nobles, especially the pope and emperors or kings.

**Millet System:** The practice allowing non-Muslim ethnic groups to live under the representative leadership of a representative, usually a cleric, in Islamic lands of

**Papacy:** The name for the powerful ecclesiastical and temporal institution based on the episcopal see of the Roman church.

**Shari'a:** Islamic law based on the Koran and Sunni tradition. This form of law recognizes no distinction between the claims of Islam and the legal requirements of citizenship in a Muslim land.

**Theocracy:** The belief that God is the ultimate ruler over a society and state and religious considerations are the primary or sole guide of its laws.

**Virginia Statute on Religious Freedom:** Law penned by Thomas Jefferson and passed in Virginia in 1786. The law forbade the state to require anyone to support or frequent a given house of worship and allowed for freedom of worship and the attendant right to support, or not, the religious practice of one's choice. It was the forerunner of the first amendment to the Constitution.

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## **10. What happens in the next life? (Westminster Confession, Chapters thirty-four and thirty-five)**

### **10.1 Preliminaries on Last Things**

Chapter XXXII deals with the question of the intermediate state. What happens to the spirits of those who die prior to the final resurrection and last judgment? One statement specifically refutes the concept of purgatory: “Besides these two places (heaven and hell), for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledgeth none” (XXXII, para. 1).

The rest of the material in this chapter are taken from notes on the eschatology class, “The Doctrine of Last Things” I taught at SGCC in 2002.

Scripture verses for this section: (*Death for the Christian*) John 11:11-14, I Thess. 4:13, Acts 7:60, II Peter 1: 13-14, II Tim. 4:6-8, Phil. 1:21-23, II Cor. 5:1-10, Heb. 12:22-24; Rev. 6: 9-11; (*Resurrection of the just*) John 5:24-27, 6:38-40, John 11: 21-27, I Cor. 15:20-27, Rom. 8:18-23, I John 3:1-3; (*Resurrection of the just and the unjust*) Daniel 12:2-3, Matt. 25:31-46, John 5:28-29, Rev. 20:11-15; (*Resurrection in the Old Testament*) Job 19:25-26, Ps. 16:9-11, 49:15, 73:24-26, Ps. 85:13, Is. 26:19-21; (*Judgment*) Matt. 11:20-24, Matt. 25:30, Rom. 2:14-16, I Cor. 3: 10-15, 4:3-5, Jude v. 13, Rev. 18:19-19:3, Rev. 20:11-15; (*Sheol*) Job 10:20-22, 17:13-16, Prov. 30:15-16; Prov. 15:24; (*Intermediate state*) Mark 12:18-25, Luke 16:19-31, Heb. 9:27-28; (*Heaven*) Rev. 21:1-5, 9-27, 22:1-5.

### **10.2 What happens when we die?**

One of the great questions all peoples everywhere ponder is “What happens when we die?” or, “Is there life after death?” Our concern is to examine what the scriptures have to say about this issue. Both the Old and New Testaments have quite a lot to say about what happens when we cross the threshold of death. This is a big mystery for most people, but one we need to explore in order to get a grasp of Christ’s teaching on the afterlife as well as the Bible’s message as a whole.

The New Testament has more to say about this matter than the Old Testament. This is because it was Jesus “*who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel*” (II Tim. 1:10). Nevertheless there are references to the afterlife in both Old and New Testaments. The New Testament references clarify the insights offered by the Old. The study of what happens between death and the resurrection is known in eschatology as the study of the intermediate state.

The intermediate state is “(t)he period between death ... and the final judgment and consummation. If Christian thought held to no final state of affairs for all creation, then perhaps one’s final situation could be conceived as being settled at death, as in Greek philosophy. However, Christian creeds have always affirmed the resurrection of the

body, the judgment of the living and the dead, and life everlasting. To affirm that each individual's destiny is caught up in the triumph of God in Christ has created the distinct possibility of reflection upon the individual's situation between death and that future event"(S.M. Smith, "Intermediate State" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 562).

The Old Testament does not speak in great detail about the intermediate state. As we have said Jesus addresses this with greater clarity. The Old Testament speaks of the grave (*qeber*) and Sheol (see below), but does not go into great detail specifically about what happens to the dead in the afterlife. Several views have become prominent: 1) the Old Testament teaches a kind of two-tiered afterlife for the righteous and the wicked in Sheol; or, 2) Sheol is a dark and gloomy place for all the dead; or, 3) Sheol is a synonym for *qeber*, the grave. (Based on Harris, Archer and Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. II, pp.892-3). We will examine this concept further in the scripture study portion of the lesson (listed above).

The Old Testament does clearly declare the blessed state of the believer after death, but there is an indication that this state is reserved for the time of the resurrection. "Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the grave (Sheol), nor will you let your holy one see decay. You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand"(Ps. 16:9-11).

The New Testament addresses the issue of the intermediate state as well. The first is the pre-resurrection view. There are several references to the nature of the afterlife before the resurrection of Christ in the New Testament. The first is in a parable or story Jesus tells about the rich man and Lazarus. "*The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell (hades) where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'* But Abraham replied '...now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us'" (Luke 16:19-26).

Finally, Jesus tells the thief on the cross, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise"(Luke 23:43). This either indicates that there is a paradise in the pre-resurrection scheme or that Jesus is referring to the coming resurrection event of his resurrection. Admittedly, these verses are difficult. In some ways they pose more questions than they answer.

A study of Bible doctrine relating to the afterlife will necessarily cover certain areas including heaven, hell, resurrection and judgment.

Heaven and hell (*gehenna*): "Although some, like Plato, imagine heaven to be a disembodied state where naked minds contemplate the eternal, unchanging ideas, in the Bible this is not so. According to Paul the whole person survives. Even the body is

raised again, so that, if it is no longer flesh and blood (I Cor. 15:50), it nevertheless has a continuity with the present body, a sameness in form if not in material element” (J.K. Grider. “Heaven” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 500).

“On the other hand, final punishment is pictured as outer darkness (Matt. 8:12, 22:13, 25:30). This suggests that both fire and darkness are metaphors used to represent the indescribable. ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers’(Mt. 7:23); ‘Truly I say to you, I do not know you’(Matt. 25:12. Exclusion from the presence of God and the enjoyment of his blessings – this is the essence of hell.”

The resurrection: The doctrine of the resurrection is clearly stated throughout the Old and New Testaments. We will study the details of the teaching when we look at the verses listed above. There are two types of resurrection in the Bible – temporal and eternal.

Two examples of temporal resurrection in the Old Testament are found in the ministry of Elijah and Elishah. Each of the raised a child from the dead. Elijah raised the widow’s son from the dead (I Kings 17:17-24) and Elishah also raised a child from the dead (II Kings 5:32-37. These are called temporal because both of these boys would later die, they did not receive eternal life at this time. The same is true with Lazarus in the New Testament. The Old Testament doctrine of the resurrection is explored in more detail in the Bible study portion of the lesson.

There are several examples of temporal resurrection in the New Testament in the ministries of Jesus, Peter and Paul. Jesus raised the widow of Nain’s son, Jairus’ daughter, and Lazarus (Matt. 8, Mark 5, John 11), Peter raised Tabitha (Acts 9), and Paul raise Eutychus from the dead after he had fallen asleep in a lengthy church service (Acts 20). The doctrine of eternal resurrection is expressed in the resurrection accounts of Jesus and discussed in detail in Paul’s epistles.

The final judgment: The judgments are addressed in the study portion of the lesson. There are temporal judgments and eternal judgments. Temporal judgment is expressed by Paul in Galatians, “*Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life*”(Gal. 6:7-8).

“The kingdom of God is like a great drama. It moves forward to a climax. All the apparently loose ends of the development are slowly combined and gathered together. The unity of the whole is seen only in the final outcome. Without the climax the drama is meaningless. It is mere motion without progress. The book of revelation, as obscure as it is in some ways, is nevertheless an expression of the dramatic principle in the moral kingdom. And it is an expression which cannot be misunderstood. Evil takes many forms. Subdued in one form, it returns in another. The beast, the false prophet, the evil woman, the wicked city, appear from stage to stage. The end is victory, the overthrow of evil, the judgment and separation of the good and bad, the descent of the New Jerusalem, the habitation of God with men” (Edwin Yoder, “New Life in Future Extension” in Erickson, Vol. 3, p. 482).

## Discussion Questions

What do you think of the concept of purgatory? Does it have any biblical precedent?  
What is your view of the millenium and final judgment? The tribulation?  
Does one's view of the millenium or the tribulation affect how they live or practice their faith?  
What is the basis of our judgment in the last judgment?  
How does the concept of a day of judgement comfort believers in their adversity, or glorify God's justice?

## Readings for Chapter Ten

S.M. Smith on "Intermediate State"  
Grudem on the Millennium  
Yoder, "What is Eschatology?"

## Glossary

**Antichrist:** A person or principle referred to in I John and described though not named explicitly in the books of Daniel, Revelation and II Thessalonians. In the latter books he is referred to as a blasphemer, powerful world ruler, usurper of God's honor, and Man of Sin. The term in Greek may mean either against Christ or in place of Christ. His coming and activity are associated with spiritual power and deception signs and doctrines.

**Day of the Lord:** A concept found in both Old and New Testaments which anticipates a day of cataclysmic proportions when God will come in manifest presence to judge his people, and the tribes of the earth. He will also reward the righteous faithful and rescue believers from wrath and oppression.

**Heaven (*ouranos, epouranios*; Hebrew, *shamayim*):** Of the physical heavens, but also the abode of spiritual beings sometimes referred to as principalities and powers. It is also used of God's abode and of the abode of the holy angels. (J.K. Grider. "Heaven" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, pp.499-500). "What pertains to or is in heaven...where Christ sits at the right hand of God...of those whose sphere of activity is above or in contrast to the earth" (Vine, Vol. II, p. 209).

*Shamayim* "falls into two broad categories, 1) the physical heavens, and 2) the heavens as the abode of God. Under the first category, heaven includes all that is above the earth, and any given passage may include all or merely a part of the whole. Heaven and earth together constitute the universe...The physical heavens tell of the glory of God (Ps. 19:1), declare His righteousness (Ps. 50:6), and praise him (Ps. 65:34). As grand as they are, they merely point to the Creator and are not to be worshiped (Ex. 20:4; Jer. 44: 17-25). Though the heavens are his throne, they will one day vanish like smoke (Is. 51:6) and be rolled up like a scroll (Isa. 34:4). Then God will create a new heaven and a new earth, unmarred by the effects of sin (Is. 65;17;66;22). The joy and glory of completed redemption will be reflected in all creation" (TWOT, Vol. II, p.935-936).

**Hell (*Hades*):** “Generally speaking the word ‘hell’ is used in Scripture to refer to a place of future punishment for the wicked dead. However, there are other meanings also. There are times when the word is used to refer to the grave, or to the place of the dead.” In addition to the other two Greek words it was believed to be “below Hades, where divine punishment was endured comparable to that in Hades” (R. P. Lightner. “Hell” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 506).

**Hell (*Geenna*):** (II Kings 16:3; 21:6; Jer. 7:32; 19:6, Mark 9:43,48, Matt. 10:28; Matt. 13:42,50, 25:41): “Gehenna, from the Greek *geenna*, is the eternal abode of the wicked. Whereas Hades is the intermediate state, Gehenna is eternal hell. Wherever it is used in the NT, it always means the place of eternal damnation. The scriptural teaching of hell goes beyond these three words, however. Frequently, especially in the gospels, hell is seen as ‘unquenchable fire’ (Matt. 3:12 cf. 5:22; 18:9) ‘damnation’ (Matt. 23:33), ‘furnace of fire’ (Matt. 13:42,50), ‘blackness and darkness’ (Jude 13), a ‘lake which burneth with fire and brimstone’ (rev. 21:8) a place ‘prepared for the devil and his angels’ (Matt. 25:41)” (R. P. Lightner. “Hell” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 506).

**Intermediate State:** This refers to the place and state of disembodied spirits of all mankind after death. The souls of the just are either in God’s presence in heaven or in the place of the wicked dead (*hades*). The Bible indicate that there were differences in the circumstances of the dead prior to and after the resurrection of Christ from the dead.

**Last Judgment:** Also known as the great white throne judgement of Revelation 20, it is the final judgment in which all souls and spirits who ever lived are assigned their final state and destination.

**Millenium:** This refers to a thousand year reign of the believers mentioned only in Revelation 20, though many scholars deduce references from other passages of Scripture. Historically, theologians have developed several views of the timing and nature of the millenium. These include a-millennial, pre-millennial, post-millennial, and present millennial (akin to the a-millennial position).

**Paradise (*paradeisos*):** “Is an oriental word first used by the historian Xenophon, denoting the parks of Persian kings and nobles. It is of Persian origin ... to the Oriental mind it expressed the sum total of blessedness.” (W.E. Vine. *Expository Words of the New Testament*, p. 158). The thief on the cross is promised transport into paradise (Luke 23:43). Paul spoke of one who was caught up into paradise (II Cor. 12:4). And the tree of life is found in the paradise of God in the Revelation of John (Rev. 2:7). Its original meaning in Hebrew as received from the Persian is “a park or enclosed garden” (Harris, Archer and Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, p. 1809). Through the Septuagint (Greek) translation of the Old Testament the word paradise came to refer to the garden of Eden.

**Parousia:** The Greek word used to denote the second coming of Christ. In ancient usage it indicated the coming of a dignitary to a city or region who was met by along the way by a delegation from the city who accompanied the dignitary back to the city.

**Purgatory:** The ancient and medieval Catholic belief that there was a third intermediate state for believers who were atoning for or being purged of their earthly sins through punishment. This process of purging prepared them for heaven. IN catholic theology they could be helped by the prayers of the faithful on earth. The sale of such indulgences helped provoke the conflict leading to the Reformation.

**Rapture:** From a Latin word meaning “to snatch away.” It comes from the Latin Vulgate translation of I Thessalonians 5: 17 and refers to the teaching that believers who remain until the second coming of Christ will be taken into the air to meet with Christ.

**Sheol:** “*The grave, hell, pit.* The KJV uses ‘grave’ thirty-one times, ‘pit’ three times. The ASV and RSV translate as ‘Sheol’ ... the word obviously refers in some way to the place of the dead “(Harris, Archer and Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, Vol. II*, p.892). In the Old Testament “the intermediate state and the destiny of the wicked get less emphasis. Resurrection for the righteous is clearly and repeatedly expressed. One problem with Sheol is that both good men and bad men go there” (TWOT, p. 892). It’s primary meaning, according to Harris, is “the grave.” “Darkness, gloom, forgetfulness, and distance from God are also implied in the word (Ps. 6:5; Isa. 38:18)”(R. P. Lightner. “Hell” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 506).

**Tribulation:** A seven-year period at the end of the age prophesied in the books of Daniel and Revelation, and by Jesus. Some prophetic passages imply that the period is divided in half indicating significant events after the first half of the period. Various eschatological schemes place the taking up of the church (rapture) before, during or after the tribulation period.

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