



## Desperate Assurance: The Impact of Limited Atonement: from John Calvin to the Westminster Confession

### IV. The Impact of Limited Atonement

- 1- We will note the development of the Doctrine of Assurance from Calvin to the Westminster Confession, first from:

#### *Dillow, The Reign of the Servant Kings:*

**John Calvin (1509-1564).** What is the basis of assurance from Calvin? Christ is the source of our assurance. How? It is on the basis of His atoning work. We are to **look to Christ** who is the pledge of God's love for us. When we look to Him, He pledges eternal life to us. Unless we **cling steadfastly to Christ**, we will "vacillate continually." (p. 250)

**Theodore Bèza (1519-1605).** Calvin's successor at Geneva departed from Calvin and grounded assurance in **evidences of fruit in the life**. Bèza's starting point was his doctrine of limited atonement. He developed a system that became known as supralapsarianism.

Bèza logically works out his system so that Jesus is the savior of the elect before their creation or fall. Assurance is thus grounded on two things: the election of God and the knowledge that we are among the ones who have been offered a redeemer, for **not all have**. For Bèza, if the **knowledge** that Christ died for us can be obtained, then we may be certain that we will not perish.

Bèza suggests that we should **look within ourselves for the evidence** that Christ died for us. We cannot comprehend God's eternal decrees, but we can see if He is **at work in our lives**. (p. 261-263)

**William Perkins (1558-1602).** The fountainhead of the experimental predestinarian's tradition. He developed a system of assurance built around the interpretation of **2 Pet. 1:10** which says **we must prove our election to ourselves by means of good works**.

According to him, 2 Pet. 1:10 teaches us to prove to ourselves that we have **faith by means of a good conscience**. Justifying faith is that by which a man is persuaded in his conscience. The will to believe does not yield assurance, but the conscience, **reflecting on the fruits of regeneration**, can. (p. 263)

There are two works of grace necessary: initial faith and perseverance. Only **the second ultimately proves that the first is valid**. If godliness is the means by which we make our calling and election sure, then the Experimental Predestinarians reasoned, we had better give a list of what it means to be godly and how to become godly. This led to the **legalism for which Puritanism is noted** and the heavy sobriety and lack of joy which is so proverbial in their churches.

Various Puritan divines discerned varying bases for assurance. For some it was **keep a pure heart**. Others based it upon a **feeling**, others on being **in love with godliness**, others on being **sincere**, and others in **keeping of the law**. (p. 265)

**Jacob Arminius (1559-1609).** He studied under Bèza in Geneva. After taking a pastorate in Amsterdam in 1587, he was asked to defend Bèza's doctrine of predestination in the light of a pamphlet circulating against it. However, after studying the matter further, he became a convert to the very opinions he had been asked to refute.

His doctrine of predestination was simple: God predestines believers. If one believes, he is elected; if he does not believe, he is not elected. Man chooses to believe; thus faith is an act of the will. However, **Arminius believes salvation can be lost** [therefore he did not believe in the doctrine eternal security]. (pp. 265-266)



- 2- From this debate emerged a number of Protestant theologies. We have been noting hyper-Calvinism. In opposition to this were the doctrines of Arminius. He supported the unlimited atonement view but he also has an erroneous interpretation of 2 Peter 1:10. Whereas the hyper-Calvinists use it to either confirm or deny election, Arminius referenced it to affirm his view that one can lose his salvation.
- 3- Obviously then, our theology is not hyper-Calvinist nor is it Arminian. We believe in unlimited atonement and eternal security. If a label is needed we would be moderate Calvinists. However, many of the denominations in America base their doctrines of atonement and security on principles that were established in the Westminster Confession. Information on this from:

*Encyclopaedia Britannica, 15th ed., s.v. "Westminster Assembly" and "Westminster Confession":*

**Westminster Assembly**, called by the English Parliament to reform the Church of England. It met from July 1643 until February 1649 holding 1,163 sessions at Westminster Abbey. The works produced were generally accepted by Presbyterians throughout the world.

**Westminster Confession.** A confession of faith of English-speaking Presbyterians. According to the confession, the doctrine of the eternal decree of predestination is that "some men and angels are predestined unto everlasting life and others foreordained to everlasting death."

- 4- This confession is the foundation of Presbyterian theology but it has found its way in every category of American Christendom. You will recognize several telltale concepts as we consult:

*Dillow, The Reign of the Servant Kings, 266-269:*

The theology of Westminster completely reversed the doctrine of Calvin. Calvin often used such synonyms for faith as **persuasion, assurance, knowledge, apprehension, perception, or conviction**. The Westminster theology used terms like **accepting, receiving, assenting, resting, yielding, answering, and embracing**—all active words. Saving faith is **not only** believing that God's word is true, **but** it is "yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God.

In regard to assurance, they clearly stated that "assurance of grace and salvation, **not being of the essence of faith**, true believers may wait long before they obtain it. Calvin asserted that the "least drop of faith" firmly assures. "But holding out Christ as the ground of assurance as a direct act seems **not to have been regarded as an option** by the Westminster divines" (Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*, 203).

Believers can lose their assurance because it is **based upon their performance**, how one's **conscience feels** about one's performance as he reflects upon his recent behavior. Our good works do not need to be perfect **only sincere**. This leads to the inevitable conclusion that perseverance and sanctification are **not based upon a response to God's love** but upon one's **intense desire to insure his salvation**. The end result is that **salvation is a payment for sanctification**.

- 5- And finally a summary from:

*Kendall, Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649, 205-210:*

While the Westminster divines never intended to make works the ground of salvation, they could hardly have come closer. (p. 205)



'Good works' done in obedience to God's commandments 'are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith', and by them believers 'strengthen their assurance' (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, xvi. ii. In Bray, *Documents of the English Reformation*, 498). (p. 206)

We are told, moreover, that our 'good works are accepted in Him' (*Confession*, xvi. vi, Bray, p. 498), not because they are perfect but because God 'is pleased to accept, and reward that which is sincere.' Assurance, then, is grounded in the reflection of our sincerity. (p. 207)

A good conscience, which must be maintained by good works, repentance, and perseverance, does not seem to be motivated by sheer gratitude to God for free salvation but by one's keen interest in salvation itself. (p. 207)

The architectural mind of Westminster theology, however, is Theodore Bèza. Limiting the death of Christ to the elect robbed reformed theology of the simple idea that Christ alone is the mirror of election, hence the ground of assurance.

Westminster theology is thus haunted with inconsistencies. These might have been largely resolved had they simply made Christ's death the ground of assurance. But positing this would have ultimately forced them to the universality of Christ's death. (p. 210)

- 6- Six hours is not enough time to do this subject justice. I can assure you however that this will not be the last you hear of it from me. The background needed to fully understand the damage that this theology has done to Protestant theology requires a study of the history of the Reformation and the doctrinal statements of many denominations.

However, I hope that this study if not lucid in all its points has at least brought to light the rationales behind some of the belief systems we often encounter. It explains why so many denominations circumvent the clear revelation of Scripture that salvation is freely given and eternally secured as a result of our faith alone in Christ alone and the subsequent efficacious grace of the Holy Spirit.

We now have some general insight regarding the confusion that seems to plague the souls of so many we encounter. I have often heard people say regarding their prospects for eternity in heaven that "I hope I'm good enough," or "I don't know if I'm saved, I hope I am."

The reason they are doubtful and have so little confidence is because they have been sincerely misled into believing that Christ did not die for all mankind but only for a predetermined few. This selection was made by God in eternity past without any essential consideration given to human free will. These few are saved because their faith in Christ was preordained and made possible by a "gift of faith" that is only granted to the elect. However, Bèza's doctrine of limited atonement presents a dilemma to any who believe in Christ. Was my faith "saving faith" or was it "temporary faith?" How am I to know?

The major passage used to give guidance is the alleged "formula" in 2 Peter 1:10: you are to make your calling and election sure. And the way this is done is through good works. Those whose conscience affirms that their works are not only good enough but numerous and sincere will be able to affirm their election and therefore their salvation and eternal life.

Many of the people who founded this country came here for religious freedom. But what many of them brought with them to freely exercise was the belief system formulated by Theodore Bèza in the late 1500s and formalized into a Confession of Faith at Westminster Abbey in the mid 1600s.



The end result is confusion about salvation, a false belief that human good confirms one's assurance, and a general lack of confidence about one's eternal future. Since good works are required to prove one's salvation it was not long before good works became salvation. You may believe in Christ if you wish but the validity of that faith is put on hold until proof can be ascertained by the subjective analysis of your works.

What I am about to say has been classified as "mean-spirited." However, my job is not to be influenced by the fact others disagree but rather to defend the Word of God. There is no biblical justification for the doctrine of limited atonement. There are no verses that support the thesis. Thus the doctrine of limited atonement is not only not Calvin it is not biblical and therefore heretical. The good works it demands are not motivated by reciprocal love for God but by a "keen interest" in proving what needs no proof save the clear testimony of the Word of God.

**Ephesians 2:8** - For by means of grace you have been saved in the past with the result that you stand saved forever through the instrumentality of faith, and that salvation not from the source of yourselves, the gift of God;

**v. 9** - not from the source of works that anyone should boast.

With the time we have left I want to present the biblically supported order of the elective decrees which is called Infralapsarianism. Whereas the prefix *supra*- refers to above, over, or before, the prefix *infra*- means below, under, or after.

### The Infralapsarianism Order of the Elective Decrees

#### 1) The decree to create mankind.

PRINCIPLE: You cannot elect what does not exist. For God to elect anyone, he must first of all be created.

#### 2) The decree to permit the fall.

PRINCIPLE: Condemnation must precede salvation. If man is in need of salvation then he is obviously in a fallen condition.

#### 3) The decree to provide salvation for all mankind.

PRINCIPLE: The doctrine of limited atonement, the principle that Christ died as a substitute for the sins of all mankind, not just a predetermined few.

#### 4) The decree to elect those who believe in Christ and to leave in just condemnation all who do not believe.

PRINCIPLE: God provides all men free will to accept or reject His grace offer of salvation through faith alone in Christ alone.

#### 5) The decree to apply salvation to those who believe in Christ.

PRINCIPLE: Each individual must first choose God's plan of salvation, after with, God decrees to save that person's soul and impute eternal life to his human spirit.

**Acts 16:30** - And after he [ the Philippian jailer ] brought them [ Paul and Silas ] out, he said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"



**v. 31** - And they said, "(You) believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved ..."

- 1- The understood subject "you" refers specifically to the Philippian jailer but generally to all who ask the question, "What must I do to be saved?"
- 2- Since "you" must exist in order to ask the question and to hear the response, then the "decree to create mankind" must come first.
- 3- It is obvious that the subject is not saved and must do something in order to be saved. Consequently, he must be fallen. Elective decree number 2: to permit the fall.
- 4- That Paul and Silas have an answer to the question indicates that a way of salvation has been provided for everyone. Elective decree number 3: to provide salvation to all mankind.
- 5- The requirement is a simple volitional decision to believe in Jesus Christ. The verb "believe" – **πιστεύω, pisteuō** – is in the imperative mood which is a challenge to human volition. We are free to accept or reject Christ as Savior. This illustrates the fourth elective decree: to elect those who believe in Christ and to leave in just condemnation all who do not believe.
- 6- Finally, it is clear that those who do believe will be saved. This is the fifth elective decree: to apply salvation to those who believe in Christ.
- 7- Thus the Infralapsarian order of elective decrees clearly reveals that salvation is available to everyone and may be appropriated by means of faith alone in Christ alone.
- 8- Consequently, those who teach the Supralapsarian order have developed a theology that is better classified as the doctrines of demons.

**1 Timothy 4:1** - The Holy Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrine of demons.

- 9- In closing, we will note several passages of Scripture that do not specifically refer to hyper-Calvinism but which are applicable in general terms:

**2 Corinthians 4:3** - (NASB) Even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing,

**v. 4** - in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

**v. 5** - For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus our Lord, and ourselves as bond-servants for Jesus' sake.

**2 Corinthians 11:3** - But I am afraid, lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your thinking should be corrupted from the virtue and values of Christ.

**v. 4** - For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you buy this hook, line, and sinker.

**v. 13** - (NASB) For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ.



v. 14 - And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.

v. 15 - Therefore, it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works.

**Galatians 1:6** - (NASB) I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel;

v. 7 - which is really not another only there are some who are disturbing you, and want to distort the gospel of Christ.

v. 8 - But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed.

v. 9 - As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed.

**Galatians 1:10** - For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ.

**Galatians 2:16** - (NASB) Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we may be justified by faith in Christ, and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law shall no man be justified.

v. 21 - "I do not nullify the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly."

- 10- What the false teachers have developed is not "Blessed Assurance" but rather "Desperate Assurance." Those who follow them have no real confidence of their salvation other than a false confidence based on their own good works, executed under a false motivation. This is human good and evil. Bèza's "Calvinism" is therefore leading many into a fiery end, either at the Judgment Seat of Christ or the eternal chaos of the lake of fire.



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