

The Logic of Calvinism¹

by
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The Westminster Confession of Faith is not just a collection of offhand pronouncements on various subjects strung together like beads on a rosary, but has a definite inward order and pattern. It is my purpose here to show just what that order and pattern is, and why the various subjects appear just where they do, I shall then briefly mention the history of their order of treatment, and finally suggest some criticisms that may be made of it.

The Pattern of the Westminster Confession

Chapter I, “Of the Holy Scripture”, is an introduction to the whole, it tells us the source from which all the rest is drawn, and the standard by which it is to be criticised. The Confession is a summary of the teachings of Scripture and Chapter I tells us so, and why it should be so, the summary itself begins with Chapter II.

This “summary of the teachings of Scripture” falls first into two main divisions – the Bible’s teaching about God, and its teaching about His works. Ch. II, “Of God, and of the Holy Trinity”, exhausts the first of these divisions, and is itself sub-divided into two sections about God’s general attributes – what divines of the period called His “essence” – and one about the special fact of His “subsistence” as Three Persons in One God. God’s “works” are the subject of all the rest of the Confessions.

God’s “works” in their turn are divided into His “works” in “eternity”, His eternal purpose or decree, and His “works” in Time”, in which this decree is executed. Ch. III, “Of God’s Eternal Decree”, handles the first of these topics, and sub-divides it into two sections about God’s general foreordaining of whatsoever comes to pass”, and six sections about His more special foreordaining of the eternal destinies of men and angles. The other large division – the execution of God’s decree – is once again the subject of the entire remainder of the Confession.

The activities in time in which God’s eternal decree is executed are creation and providence. Ch. IV, “Of Creation”, has one section on the creation of the world in general, and one on the creation of man. Ch. V “Of Providence”, also contains a division between “general” and “special”, His Special providence being mentioned in Section VII as that by which He cares for the Church. There is, however, a broader division implicit in this chapter too, and underlying the arrangement of the later chapter. The first three sections are about the broad fact of God’s rule over His world,

¹ Edited by David Jakobsen. The original is kept in the Prior archive at The Bodleian Library in Oxford, box 7 in a folder containing some of Prior’s papers on theology. There are good reasons to date this article close to 1943-1945. As Hasle has noticed the papers on which the article is written are marked “National Patriotic Fund Board, and carries a picture of military service men, with the header “On Active Service”. The two primary reasons for dating the text from early 1943 to 1945 is that we know Prior served in the airforce in 1943 to 1945 (Hasle also points that out), and since we know he was occupied with historical studies in the Westminster Confession in 1942. (He most likely wrote *Forms of Thought of The Westminster Confession* and *Of God’s Plan and Purpose* in 1942).

while the last four (including the one about the Church) reaffirms that complete rule of God in a world into which sin has entered. The remaining chapters of the Confession deal with God's way of ruling a sinful world.

Ch. VI, "Of the Fall of Man, of Sin, and of the Punishment thereof", describes the entry of sin into the world, and Ch. VII, "Of God's Covenant with Man", introduces us to a new set of divisions. The history of God's dealings with man falls into two periods – His dealing with man in his innocence under a "covenant of works", and the replacement of this, when man was no longer innocent, by a more merciful "covenant of grace", administered in two "dispensations", "under the law" before Christ's coming and "under the gospel" after it. These two dispensations" are not made use of in the arrangement of subsequent chapters, though various chapters contain remainders that such faithful people as God had under the old dispensation were saved through Christ's work for them just as we are, and were thus also under the "covenant of grace."

The first division which is made use of in subsequent chapters is that between Christ's work in "purchasing" God's mercy for sinful man, and the effective "application" of it to those who are to benefit by it. Ch. VIII, "Of Christ the Mediator", is about the first of these subjects, with a hint of the second in its last section.

The "application" of Christ's benefits, i.e. the actual achievement of salvation, is effected by an inward work of grace, with various outward helps. The inward work of grace is described in Chapter IX to XVIII, "Of Free Will", "Of Effectual Calling", "Of Justification", "Of Adoption", "Of Sanctification", "Of Saving Faith", "Of Repentance unto Life", "Of Good Works", "Of the Perseverance of the Saints", "Of Assurance of Grace and Salvation". Some of these inward workings of God's grace have an "outward reference"; saving faith, for example, being a "looking unto Jesus" for all mercy; others, such as "good works", are more centred within ourselves.

Chapters XIX to XXXI deal with the outward helps which God has given to put us on the road to salvation and keep us there. Ch. XIX is about "The Law of God" and Chapters XX to XXII about special aspects of it, "Christian Liberty, and Liberty of Conscience", Religious Worship, and the Sabbath-day", and "Lawful Oaths and Vows". Ch. XXIII is about the State, the "Civil Magistrate", and Ch. XXIV, "Of Marriage and Divorce", is a subdivision of this. Chapters XXV to XXXI are about the Church and the Sacraments – "Of the Church", "Of Communion of Saints", "Of the Sacraments", "Of Baptism", "Of the Lord's Supper", "Of Church Censures", "Of Synods and Councils."

Chapters XXXII and XXXIII are about the final end of all these processes, just in the individual, and then in the whole world over which God rules "Of the State of Men after Death, and of the Resurrection of the Dead", and "Of the Last Judgment".

We might bring out all this arrangement by the following system of numbering:

1. The Authority of the Word of God.
2. The Contents of the Word of God. ("God and His Works").
 - 2.1. Of God.
 - 2.11. Of God's general attributes.
 - 2.12. Of God as the Holy Trinity.
 - 2.2. Of God's Works.
 - 2.21. Of God's Works in Eternity – His Decree.

- 2.211. Of God's General Decree.
- 2.212. Of God's Special Predestination of Men and Angles.
- 2.22 Of the Execution of God's Decree in Time.
- 2.221 Of Creation.
- 2.2211. The Creation of the World.
- 2.2212. The Creation of Man
- 2.222. Of God's Providence.
- 2.2221. God's General Providence.
- 2.2222. God's Providence in Relation to Sin.
- 2.22221. The Covenant of Works and its Breaking.
- 2.22222. The Covenant of Grace.
- 2.222221. The Purchase of the Covenant of Grace.
- 2.222222. The Application of the Covenant of Grace.
- 2.2222221. The Inward Work of Grace.
- 2.2222222. The Outward Means of Grace.
- 2.22222223. The Fruition of Grace in Glory.
- A.N.P.

The Sources of The Pattern

The larger and Shorter Catechisms are arranged very similarly to the Confession, and at some points display the reason for this order more clearly than the Confession itself does. Thus in the Shorter Catechism, Q.7, "What are the decrees of God?", is followed by "How doth God execute his decrees", the answer being, "In his works decrees, and providence." In the Confession the conception of God's works in time as the execution of His work in eternity is not actually expressed, but silently governs its orders.

The Catechism also make more explicit another distinction which underlies the order of the Confession – the distinction between "what man is to believe concerning God" and "what duty God requires of Man" (Shorter Catechism Q. 3). The Confession up to Ch. XVIII could be regarded as a recital of God's acts, and from Ch. XIX, "Of the Law of God", almost to the end – as far as Ch. XXXI, "Of Synods and Councils" as a recital of His Demands. Karl Barth makes use of this distinction in his Gifford Lectures, in which he sums up the teachings of the Scots Confession of 1560 under the heads of "The Knowledge of God and the Service of God".² It was used also by Barth's predecessor at Basel in the 16th century, Amandus Polanus,³ in his massive theological text-book of "Syntagma";⁴ and by a slightly later Basel divine, John Wollebiuss,⁵ in his briefer "Compendium";⁶ from which it passed into John Milton's⁷ summary of his own somewhat

² The Gifford Lectures were held by Barth in 1937-1938, and subsequently published in 1939.

³ Amandus Polanus (1561 – 1910) His importance for the history of Reformed Theology has been dealt with by Robert Letham in *Amandus Polanus: A Neglected Theologian?* (1990)

⁴ *Syntagma* (1609)

⁵ John Wollebiuss (1589 – 1629)

⁶ *Compendium Theologiae Christianae* (1626)

⁷ John Milton (1608 – 1674)

unorthodox theology. It is used in the “*Medulla Theologiae*”⁸ of the early 17th century English Presbyterian William Ames,⁹ a work which particularly influenced the Westminster divines. This distinction between “faith” and “life” seems a very natural one, and has its counterpart in the emphasis of modern logicians on the distinction between “indicative” and “imperative” modes of speech. Indeed Polanus of Basel was probably attracted to it by its affinities with some of the teachings of the contemporary anti-Aristotelian logician, Peter Ramus,¹⁰ in whose work Polanus was very interested. Its value in theology is, however, questionable; our duties to God are very intimately bound up with our debt to Him for what He has done, and are probably best treated in connection with those divine deeds. The Polanus – Wollebius – Ames – Milton method of dividing up the subject-matter of theology was, at all events, far from universal among Calvinists of the Westminster period, and is less marked in the arrangement of the Confession than in that of the Catechisms.

The distinction between the covenants of works and grace was also prominent only among a section of 17th century Calvinists, though it goes back at least as far as a treatise published by Bullinger¹¹ of Zurich two years before the first edition of Calvin’s *Institutes*.¹² It achieved a fairly early popularity among the Calvinists of England and Scotland, and appears to have been introduced into Holland by William Ames. In that country it was eagerly taken up by Cocceius¹³, who saw in it a more “dynamic” way of describing God’s dealings with man than was commonly attained to in Calvinistic orthodoxy. It fitted in rather well with the historical and political bent of the English mind; and it is a little unfair to treat it, as historians sometimes do, as imposing upon us an unnaturally abstract theological strait-jacket. The story of the “covenants” and their various “dispensations” is a kind of constitutional history of the Kingdom of God; and it is more appropriate than not for Englishmen, Calvinists or otherwise, to look at theology in that way.

Apart from the distinction between the “knowledge of God” and the “service of God”, and the doctrine of the “covenants”, the main divisions mentioned above – between God and His works, His decree in eternity and its execution in time, creation and providence, general providence and special, the purchase of redemption and the application of it – already formed the fixed conventional groundplan of Calvinistic orthodoxy by the beginning of the 17th century. The original Reformers were not quite so systematic, though this ground-plan was already present in broad outline in Calvin’s *Institutes*, with its first book on God the Creator, its second on the mediation of Christ, its third on the internal work of the Holy Spirit, and its fourth on the external means by which that work is aided. These divisions were in turn derived from the main articles of

⁸ *Medulla Theologiae* (1629)

⁹ William Ames (1576 – 1633)

¹⁰ Peter Ramus (1515 – 1572) Logician whose dichotomous division of topics, known as Ramism, has had a significant influence on the history of Reformed Theology. See (Letham, 1990).

¹¹ Heinrich Bullinger (1504 – 1575)

¹² John Calvin (1509 – 1564). His highly influential *Institutes of The Christian Religion* was first published in 1536.

¹³ Johannes Cocceius (1603 – 1669). Dutch theologian who was a leading exponent of federal theology. Cocceius, according to Asselt, believed that the idea of covenant, is “not merely one topic among many *loci* of the theological system; rather it is the hub upon which the whole wheel of dogmatics turn.” (Asselt, 2001, s. 1)

the Apostle's Creed – "I believe in God the Father Almighty, ... and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord I believe in the Holy Ghost; the Holy Catholic Church" The more systematic distinctions which were introduced by Calvin's successors seems to be mostly of medieval origin. These men knew their Aquinas, and sharpened their wits in controversy with such contemporary Romanists as Bellarmine,¹⁴ and were not above taking a weapon or two from the enemy's armoury.

Even the simple division of their subject-matter into "God" and "His works" was more in the spirit of Aquinas than of Calvin, who considered it perilous to speculate on God's "essence" apart from His activities, in which alone He made His doing known. We may note also that when the Westminster divines ventured into realms which Calvin might have shunned as speculative, it was not to discuss, like the Greek Fathers, the precise nature of the union between the Persons in the Trinity, or that between the divine and the human in Christ, though they did touch incidentally upon the latter subject when debating with the Lutherans about the nature of the union between the body and blood of Christ and the sacramental elements. Their main "speculations" were more like those of the later medieval schoolmen, about such subjects as the power and the immutability of God.

¹⁴ Robert Bellarmine (1542 – 1621) A Jesuit and one of the leaders of the counter-reformation.