

THE SYSTEM OF DOCTRINE FORMULATED
BY THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY

B. T. McCLELLAND

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The System of Doctrine
Formulated by the
Westminster Assembly.

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BY

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THE SYSTEM OF DOCTRINE FORMULATED BY THE WEST- MINSTER ASSEMBLY.

FATHERS AND BRETHREN :

TO give our thoughts form, we will state two propositions: *First*, The Calvinistic system is a necessary logical sequence from premises held by Calvinist and Arminian alike. *Secondly*, The hard places in the Calvinistic system are due to narrow and unscriptural views, while broad and comprehensive views remove those difficulties altogether.

To get a point of view uninfluenced by circumstances, we must go backward in the order of events to where God was the only existence. Now, the things on which all agree are that (1) God, thus away in eternity, was a being of infinite, effulgent glory, which if made known to intelligent, sentient beings, would confer abundant blessing, and (2) that he was a being of infinite goodness, wisdom and power.

Now the fact that he has ability to bless, and goodness (a desire for happiness) will necessitate the creation of a sentient and intelligent universe, in order that they may be made blessed by a knowledge of his glorious attributes; and having created them, infinite goodness necessitates that there be a revelation of his glory, in order to that happiness, and that that revelation be the brightest in order that the happiness may be the greatest. Then, as to method, infinite wisdom sees at once the best plan for securing these ends, and infinite goodness necessitates that this plan be taken, for it will not permit the adoption of a plan securing less good when a more effective is practicable. This plan, to be most effective, must refer not simply to a general outline, but must include the minutest details; and the execution of this plan must imply not simply a general providence, but a particular as well. This plan, therefore, is God's eternal counsel, the adoption of it is his eternal decree, and the execution of it is the universal providence by which he works all things after the counsel of his own will,

Since the motive that lies back of all exist-

ence is the revelation of God's glory and the production of happiness, whatever exists is created or permitted because it is necessary to the highest glory of God or the greatest happiness of his universe. If sin exists, it is for this reason, and if redemption is provided or punishment inflicted, it will be for the same reason. If redemptive influences are applied so that any are saved, this is the explanation, and if any are passed by, no other reason can be given. Thus the two ends of existence are to glorify God and enjoy him.

If any are saved, it will be through God's sovereign mercy and their unconditional election. Sovereign mercy, because having sinned, the law demands their punishment, and if they receive mercy instead, it will be because the King, by an act of sovereignty, sets aside the law and lifts the penalty. Unconditional election, because having sinned, none can do anything to atone for the past or bring God under obligation to save. In this all are alike, so that if any are saved, it must be in spite of demerit and without condition.

Then, while those elected are chosen while in their sins, and since holy inclinations and

choices must be developed in them through redemptive influences brought to bear, it is evident they must be brought up to the point of being willing unwillingly. This is implied in God's statement: "They shall be willing in the day of my power." Coöperation of the sinner in his own regeneration is therefore an impossibility, and the doctrine of effectual calling is made a necessity.

Then, since election was (1) to salvation, and since effectual calling only inducted into a saved condition, it follows logically that redemptive influences once begun will be continuously applied until the person finally perseveres in holiness. It was the logic of the case which led Paul to be "confident of this very thing, that he that hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ." And since election was (2) to holiness, it follows that those influences thus applied will result at the end of life in entire sanctification.

Thus we have a complete system of logical necessities. To a God of infinite glory and goodness, creation and revelation are neither uncertain nor optional, but are a necessity as

strong as his own nature. By a necessity of that same nature the glory revealed will be the highest, and the happiness produced the greatest. The plan formed will be the best, and in its execution it will not be varied from by a hair's breadth. All that is caused or permitted under that plan will be for the highest glory of God and the greatest good of his creatures. Any who are saved, having sinned, must be saved through sovereign and unconditional election. Any having been elected are regenerated, kept and sanctified by divine saving power.

We will now consider the hard places in the Calvinistic system. We will notice four.

FIRST, *Since sin exists, it is for the glory of God.* God was no doubt infinitely glorious, alone, away in eternity; but that would be a grim kind of glory, with no evidence of his wisdom and power; no sentient life to enjoy his bounty, no intelligent existences to bask in the sunshine of his love. That, I say, would be a grim kind of glory; but now suppose he created a material universe as we see it circling in space. Then the heavens declare the glory

of God because they reveal his wisdom and power. Suppose he peoples that universe with life, so that to its farthest verge it is instinct with happiness, this will glorify him because it reveals his goodness; that is, it shows him to be one who desires happiness. Now, suppose he creates intelligent existences, able to comprehend his divine perfection, and doing so are filled with wonder, love and praise. God is thus glorified, because it is alone to such that a revelation is possible, and when contemplating him they are filled with praise, it is the tribute which intelligence pays to worth, and by it he is glorified. "He that offers praise glorifies his Maker."

Now, it is evident that this appreciation will be increased and this glory heightened just in the degree that he reveals his glorious attributes. Does sin furnish the condition of this revelation? It most certainly does. Suppose one of those lofty intelligences, able to look up and understand God, able to distinguish and free to choose between right and wrong, actually sins; and suppose God visits a penalty swift and dire, just equal to the sin. That is justice, and justice is a glorious attri-

bute of God's character; but without sin it could not have been manifested, because justice is the infliction of penalty in case of wrongdoing. Again, suppose instead of visiting the penalty at once, God postpones its infliction, and bears with the sinner for his good. That is forbearance, and forbearance is a glorious attribute of God's character; but forbearance is forbearance with sin, and without sin it never could have been manifested. Again, suppose that while he bears with the sinner he receives at his hand taunt and reproach and abuse, and still bears with him. This is long-suffering; but without sin we never could have known that God had longsuffering as an element in his character. Again, suppose instead of inflicting the penalty at all, he were to lift it altogether. That is forgiveness; but forgiveness is forgiveness of sin, and therefore without sin it never could have been known that God is a forgiving God. Just once more, suppose, in order to make it possible to forgive, he was willing to endure the penalty himself, to suffer and bleed and die. In this is revealed the infinite depths of redeeming love, and in this consists his greatest glory. The highest

note of praise touched by angel and redeemed saint around the throne is when they cry, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing." There is no theme so glorious as that of redeeming love. But redemption is redemption from sin, and without sin there could have been no redemption and no revelation of God's redeeming love. Did God, in devising to manifest his greatest glory, plan to permit sin, then he took the very course which made its revelation possible, and through redemption he actually secured it.

SECONDLY, *Since sin exists, it is necessary to the highest happiness of the universe.* The happiness of an intelligent creature is secured in the contemplation of the beautiful, and the amount of happiness depends on the degree of beauty. Man sees in the landscape the sunset and the starry heavens, in flowers, and poetry, and music, and painting, and sculpture, beauties to which his mind responds pleasurably: but now let him rise to contemplate God as seen in creation, and his happiness will be as much increased as the glory of the Creator

excels the beauty of the things made. But we have seen that the glory of God revealed in redemption immeasurably exceeds that of the natural attributes seen in creation. So that the happiness of a redeemed saint is immeasurably greater than that of one who knows nothing of God as seen in connection with sin and redemption. Plainly, then, if the entire human race were redeemed, the aggregate happiness of the race would be increased; but the same will be true if there is practically universal salvation; and this we understand the Bible to teach. One-half of the human race die in infancy; and to these Christ becomes the second Adam, undoing the work of the first. So that, while through its connection with the first Adam the child inherits guilt and a sinful nature without any action of its own, through its connection with the second Adam it is regenerated, and its guilt atoned for without the exercise of personal faith. So that the child, dying in infancy, is saved to a certainty. One-half of the human race, therefore, are saved as infants; so that if any adults at all are saved, there will be a majority; but, as we look backward, from

righteous Abel on, we see already an innumerable company have been saved; and the human race has only begun, and the millennium hurries on apace, when all men will know the Lord, when the curse of unproductiveness will be lifted from the earth, and it will teem with redeemed billions; and this will last so long as to become the normal condition of the world. Scientists tell us that the supply of the vital forces of light, heat, air and moisture is sufficient to sustain human life on the earth for ten million years longer. This supply is presumptively to be used; so that when the grand sum total is made, the number of the saved as compared with the lost will be as everything to nothing; so that practically there will be universal salvation.

To illustrate what I mean by practically universal salvation; suppose a farmer has a thousand acres in cotton. He has made a splendid crop. He has saved a thousand bales; but as he looks at it with satisfaction, a renter comes and says, "At the back side of your field a part of a row was missed, and if you'll send and gather it, you'll have twenty-five pounds more." What does the farmer do? Does he

rush off his hands, and say, "I must have the last lock?" He does no such thing. He looks at his thousand bales piled up, and says, "What is twenty-five pounds? Let it go. I'm satisfied." Exactly so salvation is to be, so a success numerically that Christ is to see of the travail of his soul and be satisfied. The farmer saved his crop, practically all of it; so the salvation of the race is to be practically universal.

Another illustration. Suppose we have here a great blackboard, and we write on it a number composed of twelve periods of three figures each. The last period will be decillions, the highest number used in ordinary computations. Now suppose we fill each of those places with a nine (9); you will then have the largest number that can be expressed in ordinary figures. Let this number represent the entire population of the earth for all time. The present population of the earth is counted at one billion four hundred million. The total population of the earth up to the close of the incoming century, when many think the millennium will be ushered in, will somewhat exceed one hundred billion. Suppose of this number the great majority are lost; suppose

that number actually will amount to one hundred billion, so that this must be deducted from the great number of thirty-six places. In doing so, have you disturbed the great number? Only in one figure, and that by one unit. It remains practically just as it was before; but will this great number represent the saved? We answer, No, because that is a multitude that no man can number. That multitude is so great that in your attempt to express it you must extend your line of figures until the mind becomes bewildered. It is beyond human computation. Now, as to the amount of happiness that these enjoy, each of these has redeemed existence. He looks directly into God's face and beholds his ineffable glory, and knows that the electing love of God was fixed on him personally, and this is the highest happiness of which a creature is capable. It is incomparably greater than was possible to one who knew nothing of God as seen in connection with sin and redemption; and when the number of the saved is practically universal, the aggregate happiness of the universe is immeasurably increased; so that, again, when arranging to produce the greatest happiness

in his universe, God planned the existence of sin, he did so wisely, because the existence of sin is a *sine qua non* to the attainment of it.

THIRDLY, *As to election.* You state the doctrine of election to an Arminian; that God, of his own sovereign mercy, unconditionally elects some to everlasting life; that these he effectually calls, regenerates and saves, while he passes others by and leaves them to go down to death, and he at once pictures to himself an unreasonable God, picking out one here, one there, and another yonder, while he leaves the great masses of men to go down to eternal death, when he might just as well have saved the rest; and he says that is a hard doctrine; and it would be if it were true; but, bless his name, God's electing love took in practically the entire human race, leaving just enough to illustrate his justice; and this was necessary, for if the full-orbed glory of God is to be seen eternally, there must be a manifestation of his justice, for justice is a glorious attribute. Thus, instead of election being a hard doctrine, it is the most glorious one of all. A race is dead in sin, helpless, hating God, unwilling to be saved, resisting saving influences, lost, lost

now, outraged law demanding their punishment. For this lost race the sovereign God sets aside the law, quickens to life, creates in them love and faith, makes them willing, saves them from themselves and in spite of themselves, and lifts them into a condition of redeemed existence eternally. Hard! Surely this is the most glorious doctrine of all.

FOURTHLY, *As to eternal punishment.* Reason cannot demand that a universe controlled by an all-wise, loving and powerful being must contain no evil, for the universe, as it is now, is controlled by such a being, and still it has evil in it. What reason must demand is that evil shall be reduced to a minimum, only so much being permitted as is necessary to secure the maximum of happiness. This our position of practical universalism asserts.

But would not a greater amount of happiness be secured by absolutely universal salvation? I answer probably not. (1), God in this life uses the sight of sin to deter from sin. This creates the presumption that possibly in the future life a part of the motive by which God will keep free beings in ways of holiness and so happiness, will be the sight of

evil. (2), The worth, and so the joy, of redemption will be derived in part from a knowledge of the awful depths from which one has been lifted. This cannot be known so clearly as to be seen. (3), The supreme happiness of a redeemed saint will consist in viewing the full-orbed glory of God; but without a manifestation of his justice his full glory will be obscured, and so the happiness of the redeemed limited.

Three remarks in conclusion—

First. Calvinism is a system of comfort. The Christian feels within himself holy impulses and inclinations rising and triumphing which are evidently not natural, but gracious; and he has a right to infer in all humility, but confidently, "I'm a chosen one, and he that hath begun a good work in me will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ." Believing this, he thanks God and takes comfort.

Secondly. In Revelation xix. 6 the redeemed hosts look backward from the end of time and view God's plan, then wrought out in all its glorious completeness, and seeing the marvellous wisdom of it, break out in the glad acclaim, "Alleluia, for the Lord God omnipot-

tent reigneth." The Arminian is compelled by his uncertain system to so wait in suspense; but the Calvinist knows with perfect certainty that God's plan is now just as complete and those glorious ends just as certain as they will be in the last day; and it is a system of comfort.

Thirdly. Let us watch for the providence of God. The two ends for which the plan was formed are God's highest glory and the creature's greatest happiness. To secure these ends the plan was arranged in all its minutest details. In the working out of this plan, therefore, that which comes to the child of God is brought because it is for his good and for God's glory; and, though it may not be for the present joyous, but grievous, yet he rejoices in it because he knows that all things work together for his good. Let us watch for the providence of God, and so we who hold the Calvinistic system get the full comfort of it; for it is a system of comfort.