

TRUTH VS. ERROR

A LETTER TO A PRESBYTERIAN MINISTER

ABOUT CONDITIONAL “THEOLOGY”

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Dear Wesley:

Many times I have reminisced about our former conversation relative to conditional theology. I am inclined to believe that you do not hold to the “theology,” actually, as it is not in harmony with the Westminster Confessions. In our own Reformed Confessions, “conditions” do not appear except in the mouth and in the mind of the Remonstrant Arminians as expressed in the Rejection of Errors. The Reformed fathers in drawing up the Confessions never used it in a Reformed (good) sense. (Canons of Dordt, 1, 9 Rejections of Errors, I,III,V). For the term itself does not have a Reformed connotation. It is true that there are Reformed theologians who hold to “condition,” but without support from the Westminster or Reformed Confessions. Why then do we find in the Larger Catechism, Q. 32, that faith is represented as a condition? I would answer this question by saying that the LC does not represent faith as a condition! It says that God “requires faith as the condition to interest them in Him,” but this is not to make God’s saving grace contingent upon something out of man. For we also read in this place that God in the covenant “promises and gives His Holy Spirit to all His elect, to work in them that faith.” Here God promises His Spirit, and promises faith “with all other saving graces.” Then it would be nonsense, wouldn’t it?, to speak of faith as a condition to receive the Holy Spirit, or to receive faith! We cannot believe that faith, which is a saving grace, can be a condition to receive “all other saving graces.” Nor is that the meaning of the term “condition” in the LC, 32 but the meaning is to be sought in harmony with the Westminster Confessions. It is in LC 73 that we find the true interpretation of this term, “Faith justifies a sinner...only as it is an instrument...” Faith, therefore, is not a condition unto justification in the sense that if we exercise faith, thank God will justify us. The term “condition” then, as used here, does not mean a prerequisite, but “an instrument by which he receives...Christ” (LC,73); and “the way which He had appointed them to salvation” (LC,32). Wouldn’t you agree, then, that faith is a requirement, a means, a way or instrument, and that is less confusing to use these terms than the one (“condition”) preferred by Arminians? For the fact that faith is spoken of as a requirement is supported by the Westminster Confessions., VII (III), “requiring faith that they may be saved,” and God “promises to give unto all (the elect) His Holy Spirit to make them willing and able to believe.” But if we say that faith is a condition, we as much as say that faith is a condition unto having faith! Or that God promises to make us willing and able to believe on the condition that we believe!

Searching further, I read “faith...is the lone instrument (not “prerequisite”) of justification... and is ever accompanied with all other saving graces” (Conf. XI,II). Nor is

repentance a condition unto pardon, but rather a necessity to that end: “repentance... is of such necessity to all... that none may expect pardon without it” (XV,III).

In “Presbyterian Tracts” (Pres.Bd.Pub.), Vol.2, it is said, “If a man is justified on account of the act of believing, and that act he can perform by the power of free will, he has as much ground of boasting as he could possibly have...” (P.53). on page 54 I was happy to read that evangelical obedience is not “the condition of our justification,” but the “fruit and consequence of our justification.” For we “must be accepted in Christ before we can perform any” activity pleasing to God. And since we are by virtue of sovereign election already accepted in the Beloved One (Ephesians 1:4, 6), what can be a condition for us to be accepted in Him? On p. 77, the meaning of “condition” as “an act performed by our own strength previously to our receiving any benefit from this covenant” is rejected as basically Armenian. That man must fulfill certain stipulations before God can bestow the blessings of the covenant is repudiated as unreformed. “As the word condition is so vague, and as it has been so commonly used in an erroneous sense, it is expedient to drop the word as it relates to faith (and)... justification; for all orthodox theologians acknowledge that faith itself is one of the richest blessings of the covenant... and cannot, therefore, be the condition of that covenant in a strict and proper sense. The sound doctrine then is that faith is the instrument of our justification”.

Have you considered Presbyterian theology in this connection as found in the “Reformation Principles” of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., Chap. IX, 3? Here we find language which plainly indicates that the promise and covenant are unconditional: “This is a Covenant of Promise, in which God...promises to all whom Christ represented, all the good things of which they shall have need in the present and future states of existence.” Concerning “all the promises of God to the elect” there are no conditions “to be performed by the elect” (IX,4). Neither faith, repentance or obedience, “or any other thing” are conditions of the covenant (IX 9). It is unconditional. We, as ministers, should avoid the idea of a mere offer, much worse the idea of an attempt to bestow, for “God has promised in this covenant to bestow on all the elect faith, repentance, and holiness as well as happiness; and Christ... enables them to believe, repent and live a life of sincere godliness” (ibid.). These Covenanter Presbyterian are equally plain when they “condemn the following errors:” “4. That faith is a condition of the covenant...” “5. That God’s gracious promises are suspended upon conditions to be performed by man” (Declaration and Testimony, 172). Here is where men truly Presbyterian and truly Reformed may shake hands warmly and enthusiastically.

The other matter I discussed last with you was that of so-called “presumptive regeneration.” As I remember, you seemed inclined to this idea. We do know “that all that are baptized are” not necessarily regenerated (Conf. XXVII,V). But with respect to infants dying in infancy, do we need “presumptive regeneration”? I think you will agree that only elect baptized are or shall be regenerated. Then there is no need to presume the regeneration of the elect. For the efficacy of baptism is...not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongs unto, according to the counsel of God’s own will,in His appointed time.” Now this statement reveals not what we presume, but what we believe; namely, that the efficacy of baptism is experienced by the elect and is, therefore, a matter of faith. This has the support of “the promise is unto you and to your children, as to them that afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call,” and “the children of the promise are counted for seed” (Acts 2:39; Romans 9:8). Presupposed

regeneration rests on a very shaky foundation, Baptism, as a result, is no more than a supposed baptism; its sealing is no more than a supposed sealing, and its strengthening of faith, as a means of grace, no more than presumed strengthening. And no more comfort or hope is had than the nourishment a starving man has from an imaginary meal. It is really the Triune God who does the baptizing, not the minister, nor the church, and He does not baptize on the basis of supposition. Baptism, being an institution of Christ, proceeds on the ground of the command and promise of Christ that He will be a God to us and a God to our seed. Baptism speaks the same message as the Gospel, that Jesus shall save His people from their sins. Baptism is no more a sign of presupposed regeneration, than the wine in the Lord's Supper is a symbol of presupposed remission of sins. It is a sign that He "witnesseth and sealth unto us that He doth make an eternal covenant of grace with us" (Bap. Form). And this we believe that God does with all His elect only, as Abram believed God, and was justified. And so every baptism by a minister of the Gospel in the name of the triune God testifies!

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