

“The Sovereignty of God”
Exodus 19:1-6; Jeremiah 18:1-11;
Colossians 1:9-14; Luke 4:1-8, 42-44

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It was the best of times and it was the worst of times. (OK, I stole that from somebody.) But that seems to me to be the way the whole of the 1500s through the 1800s felt, at least in certain quarters. We have been talking about the confessions this summer. We've talked about the confessions of the 1500s and one of those came out of Scotland, and a couple out of continental Europe. Maybe the English felt left out, so about 100 years later, in 1643-1648, there was a gathering that came up with another confession.

It was a time when the world was changing. Merchants were beginning to have a lot more wealth and there began to be more people who had more time. The printing press had made things more available and people were in the middle of this renaissance in thinking and wondering about who they were. The Reformation had occurred and people were beginning to think people should have more say because they, after all, could have direct access to the Word. There was a sense of more direct access to God.

There was a conflict in England. Really it was between the independents and the royalists. The royalists, as you might suspect, wanted the royal majesty of the king in place. The independents were saying the king's needs to be put aside. We really don't need a king. We need the people's voice. We need more variety. We need to be able to think for ourselves.

There came a king to the throne named James I. He was James the VI in Scotland, then when he got the kingship of England, he became James I. In those days, he had a Parliament, but really, all the Parliament did was serve as a buffer between the king and taxes. That was their main power—they had the power to tax. The king had the power to call them into session. James knew that there was a growing restiveness and that they wanted more power than just taxation, so he didn't want to call the Parliament into session. He put it off as long as he could. He was a little profligate and spent a lot, and finally it was called.

One of the reasons he struggled with it so much is that he knew there were these independents, these folks who were really focusing on their religion, and they wanted to change the nature of the church. The word “Puritan” comes from the idea that they wanted to purify the church that was already there. They wanted to change the Episcopalian structure. The compromise would be that the bishops would be heads of synods, and then they would have local presbyteries and local churches having much more say. So the presbyteries would be made up of people from the local churches and it would begin to change the nature of governance.

James said, “If there are no bishops, there will be no king and I don’t want that.” In fact, he went on to say that if you have people who are serious about their religion, they seriously think about things. And if they seriously think about things, they are not easy to control. What we really want to do is make sure that there are plenty of distractions and merriment, especially on Sundays (which was an anathema to the Puritans). But he recognized that because people were more thoughtful, the divine right of kings was under question. And he believed in the divine right of kings.

So that’s the context into which this Parliament was called. Then the Parliament said, “We want to change the way we do things. Let’s call in all these learned theologian/minister/clergy types and gather them together—called the Westminster Assembly of Divines—and have them come up with a new confession. They really had a three-fold goal: (1) They were after a new confession that suggested a new way of doing church, a new polity, a new way of shaping the way things were governed; (2) To revamp the worship so it was simpler; not so much pomp and circumstance, more focus on the word; and (3) A single confession of faith around which to unify the nations of England and Scotland.

They were called together to begin to do this task, to unify Scotland and England, have one confession, one way of worshiping, one governance for the church. We might expect they spent a lot of time arguing about theology, but basically the theology was fairly set for them. They were pretty sure and confident with that. What they really spent a lot of time arguing about was simply about how to govern the church, because there were the independents on one side that wanted a congregational-based governance so that each congregation was basically its own ruler, and the other side that wanted a hierarchical church with a head of the church with bishops below him. Then there were people in between who wanted to find a compromise, where there was some of both.

To compound things, during the time they were meeting, the English Civil War started. So you had some people who cared about the Presbyterian way of doing things, but were royalists. There were some who wanted the Episcopalian way of doing things, but were independents. And then you had those who were strictly independent and wanted a very congregation way of doing things. So there was a recognition that people had differences of opinion. We had one of the Divines, like Jeremiah Burrows, who could say, “We can have difference of opinion, and yet we can have a unity of believers.” They were beginning to understand the reality of that statement.

But these were folks who were very serious about their faith. Edward Reynolds was one of the Divines who took the middle way. He wanted the more Presbyterian perspective in the Westminster Assembly, but then Cromwell won and they went independent for a while in England. After this was agreed to by the Parliament—the Parliament actually voted Westminster in as the national confession—a few years later the royalists came back and changed everything again. Reynolds was one who took the middle way and ended up a bishop in the Episcopalian church.

During their years of debate, they were trying to figure out a number of things. One of the things they tried to figure out was how to put the catechisms together. They put a confession together, which is fairly expansive, with a lot of instruction and detail. They put a Larger Catechism together for adults that was a little more concise. And they put a Shorter Catechism together that was really a catechism for young people. They were struggling with how to describe God in that shorter catechism. For that assembly, there were five Scots clergymen who came down to be part of the assembly. They were not voting members, but they could certainly speak their mind on the floor and were very influential. One of those was George Gillespie. As they were debating how to answer this question in a short form, he began a prayer. His prayer began this way:

O God, thou art Spirit, infinite, eternal, unchangeable in Thy being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.

I'm sure the prayer went on and on. After he was finished, they remembered how he started the prayer, and that became part of the Shorter Catechism—Question #4, What is God?

So there are a couple of things I think we can begin to take away from what happened. One was how in the confession they were trying to recognize the wonder of who God is. They were earnestly recognizing God was the creator. Part of the problem we have when we talk about sovereignty is some of the history in between then and now. But when they talked about sovereignty, I think they were talking about God being in relationship with us. When they thought about their sovereign, they thought about the way he was influencing their lives all the time. So when they talked about the sovereignty of God, it was a way of thinking about God's relationship to us. God was always present. God's way was always available for us.

This is one of those confessions that has a high view of God who yet is in relationship to God's people. In conjunction with the recognition of the wonder of God, there is the recognition of God's presence with us. That, I think, is part of what they meant by sovereignty.

Now the interesting thing I've always thought about this confession, is that it is a confession that suggests that everything is determined. There is this high view of the sovereignty of God and here's a quote that I always took as meaning everything was determined, that God set everything up. It says:

God, from all eternity, did the most wise and holy council of God, his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass.

I took that as determinism. But I didn't read the next line. I think that line really is saying that God created all that is and by that creation has ordained whatever comes to pass. The next line, however, says,

Yet so as thereby neither is God the author of sin nor is violence offered to the will of the creature, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away but rather established.

That's kind of convoluted language. I've talked about it as vertical and horizontal causation. God caused it all to happen; God is creator. He maintains it. But they talk about how God doesn't take away, but establishes second causes. That is the horizontal. In creation, we have choice, we have will, we have forces that are at work. God set things up that way. I was astounded when I read this and saw that in here, because I think what it does is remind us that while God is sovereign and we are in relationship to that sovereign, we have choice to make.

And they are an example of the choices that need to be made. They were struggling how to understand how to live out their faith, how to be a nation. In some ways, I suspect they wanted to be like the Israelites when Moses came down and said they wanted to be a priestly and holy nation. Maybe over the course of time they actually found out they are a little bit more like Jeremiah's version of the nations that struggled not to do evil in God's eyes. It was a time of recognition that power could be isolated in a few, or it could be spread out. It was a time when they recognized that they may not be able to shape all of the government's actions, but they were responsible to speak to it. It was a time when they were trying to understand what it meant to be faithful people in the midst of conflict, in the midst of uncertainty in the world around them, change that was going on.

I think it was the faith of those folks at Westminster who were trying to say something very similar to what was said in Timothy, where it says, "Through Christ we have the choice to lead lives worthy of God, fully pleasing to him as you bear the fruit of every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God because he has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his son."

Just one aside on the word "knowledge," the knowledge of God. I looked up the Greek, and a better translation would be "as you grow in the proper and experiential knowledge through direct relationship with God."

I think that the Divines, the folks who tried to put together the Westminster Confession, were recognizing this direct relationship with God, that our knowledge in that way, that experiential and direct relationship with God can grow because of the grace of Christ, and that we aren't really living in any human kingdom as we allow Christ to be our King, but are transferred into his kingdom by the grace of God. Thus, we endeavor to do what is worthy in God's eyes and bear the fruits of goodness by God's grace. When we do that I think we truly can glorify God and enjoy him forever. Amen.