

CHAPTER TWENTY:

THE GOSPEL AND ITS GRACIOUS EXTENT

This chapter is the only completely new chapter not found in any form in the Presbyterian Westminster Confession of Faith of 1647. It was added because of the rise of Deism that taught God could be known by human reason and natural revelation, without the need for special revelation. Ours is a 'scientific age' that also exalts man's ability and so this chapter continues to be very relevant,

The First Revelation of the Gospel

1. *As the covenant of works was broken by man's sin and was unable to confer life, God in His mercy promised to send Christ, who would be woman-born; and by means of the promise the elect would be called, and faith and repentance wrought in their hearts. In this promise the very substance of the gospel was revealed as the effectual means for the conversion and salvation of sinners.*

As soon as sin entered the world God revealed the promise of salvation (= the Gospel), as written in Genesis 3:15. The "offspring" of the woman includes all her righteous descendants (see Rm. 16:20, Rev. 12:17). But it is the one offspring, Jesus Christ, who would deliver the fatal blow to defeat the devil. Old Testament believers were to expect the Saviour to come from the offspring of Abraham (Genesis 12:7), David (2 Samuel 7:12). Hebrews 11 shows they had promises of salvation and they believed them (see verses 39-40). In Jesus' day the faithful remnant waited for the fulfilment of God's redemptive promises (Luke 2:25,38, 23:51). Galatians 4:4 may refer back to Genesis 3:15. Salvation has always been in the same way, even in the Old Testament.

How much did Adam and Eve understand? At least the following 3 things:

1. Salvation is by **grace**. Genesis 3:15 is not a command to be obeyed, but a promise God guarantees to fulfil. God will put enmity between them and the devil. Adam had sinned and deserved death. So the promise was of grace alone.
2. Salvation is by **faith**. The proper response to a promise is trust. Note that in Romans 4:13-16, promise is tied to both grace and faith.
3. Salvation is by a **Redeemer**. This triumph over Satan would not be by their own efforts, but by the victory of the offspring of the woman.

The Gospel is in the Word of God alone

2. *This promise of Christ and of salvation by Him is revealed to men by the Word of God alone. Neither the works of creation and providence, nor the light of nature, reveal Christ and His grace to men, not even in a general or obscure way; much less is it possible by their means for men who lack the revelation of Christ by the promise of the gospel to attain to saving faith or repentance.*

Salvation is only possible by the special, redemptive revelation of the Bible.

(a) The Gospel is in no way revealed in general revelation, whether the works of creation or providence, or man's inner consciousness. General revelation is clear and sufficient for the purpose for which it was given, i.e. that the one, true and living God may alone be worshipped (see Romans 1:18-23). But this is not the Gospel; there is no promise of a Redeemer in general revelation. Note the connection between Romans 1:16-17 that teaches the Gospel is the power of God to save, and Romans 1:18-2:16 that teaches that the wrath of God is revealed, that men are without excuse, and that sinners not having the law will perish (1:18,20, 2:12).

(b) There is no salvation apart from the promise of the Gospel. Men will be lost if they never hear the Gospel. Men must hear the Gospel to have the possibility of being saved. The general revelation is sufficient to make all men without excuse, but not enough to save anyone.

The Gospel is Revealed to Whom God Wills

3. *The revelation of the gospel to sinners, both to nations and to certain persons, together with the promises and precepts which belong to gospel obedience, has been made at various times and in a variety of places, according to the sovereign will and good pleasure of God. The promise of the making known of the gospel has not been made contingent upon any good use made by men of their native abilities developed by means of light common to all, for such a development has never taken place, nor can it do so. Hence in all ages the extent to which the gospel has been proclaimed, whether to wider or more confined areas, has been granted to persons and nations in greatly varying measures according to the all-wise will of God.*

(a) God is completely free/sovereign to reveal the Gospel to which men and nations He chooses. In the Old Testament times it was almost entirely the Jews (Amos 3:2, Acts 14:16-17, 17:30). Men and nations do not deserve to have a Gospel to save them. Multitudes even today have never heard the Gospel and thus have had no opportunity to be saved.

(b) God does not reveal the Gospel to any in response to some supposed goodness in them. Cornelius is sometimes given as an example of a ‘good heathen’, but in fact he had already embraced the revealed religion of the Old Testament (Acts 10:1-3). No one has ever made good use of general revelation (Romans 3:10-12), nor is it possible to do so (Romans 8:7-8). God sends the Gospel according to His own gracious will (Matthew 11:25-27).

(c) The doctrine of God’s sovereignty thus preserves missionary zeal from errors which would destroy it.

1. Total inability preserves us from thinking men can make good use of general revelation by their own efforts.
2. God’s sovereignty in salvation preserves us from thinking everyone ought to have a ‘chance’ to be saved
3. Effectual calling preserves us from thinking that men can be saved in any other way than through the Gospel.

The Gospel is Sufficient to Save Sinners

4. *The gospel is the only external means of making Christ and saving grace known to men, and it is completely adequate for this purpose. But that men are dead in their sins may be born again – that is to say, made alive, or regenerated – something further is essential, namely, an effectual, invincible work of the Holy Spirit upon every part of the soul of man, whereby a new spiritual life is produced. Nothing less than such a work will bring about conversion to God.*

(a) The Gospel is the “only external” and “completely adequate” means of making salvation known. Therefore the great task of the church is to make the Gospel known.

(b) The revelation of the Gospel will only save sinners if accompanied by a powerful work of the Holy Spirit in producing new life. Read John 6:44, 1 Corinthians 1:22-24, 2 Corinthians 4:4,6. To give light a bulb must receive electrical power. For this power of the Holy Spirit we must pray as we go to make the Gospel known.