

Book Review: Truth's Victory Over Error

A reprint of David Dickson's commentary on the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF). Reviewed by Rev C J Connors.

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"Truth's Victory Over Error" is David Dickson's commentary on the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF). David Dickson lived from 1583 to 1663, and was, as most will be aware, a Scottish minister and theologian. His life spanned the meeting of the Westminster Assembly, and its reception by the Church of Scotland, and he co-authored (together with James Durham) "The Sum Of Saving Knowledge" which is found in the back of the Free Presbyterian publication of the WCF most of us use.

Dickson's commentary on the confession is the fruit of his lectures to students for the ministry, as Professor of Divinity at Glasgow and later Edinburgh. This book has the distinction of being the first commentary on the Confession. This fact gives it a special significance for us, for it represents the instruction on confessional Presbyterianism in its clear and undiluted integrity. As such this book is a must for all the office-bearers and serious minded members of the EPC, for we are vitally concerned with being faithful to the heritage the Lord has given us.

Dickson's method of teaching is catechetical. He works through the Confession article by article in question and answer form, giving Scripture proof for the confessional statement which he affirms. He then names and exposes the errors that have arisen against each particular doctrine, and proceeds to give the reasons by which they are proved to be false. Let me demonstrate this by way of an example from chapter 3 of the Confession on "The Decree Of God." Dickson reasons thus:

Question 1. Did God from all eternity, by the most holy and wise counsel of his will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass?

Yes; Eph.1:11, Rom. 11:33; Heb. 6:17; Rom. 9:15,18.

Well then, do not the Socinians, Arminians, and Jesuits err, who maintain, The things which come to pass in time, to fall out and come to pass without the decree of God?

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Yes.

By what reasons are they confuted?

1st, From the knowledge of God, whereby, from all eternity, he hath known all things, infallibly, which come to pass or shall be in time, Acts 15:18, John 21:17; Heb. 4:13. But all things which come to pass in time could not have been infallibly known from eternity, but in the decree of his divine will. 2nd, From God's natural way of working in time, 1 Cor. 12:6; Rom. 11:36. Whence it is evident that God worketh effectually and immediately, in time, all things which are done. But he worketh by his will those things which he will have to be in time (after that manner, and in that time, how, and when they come to pass), Ps.115:3. But that act of willing cannot happen to God in time, but hath been in him from all eternity, because God is unchangeable, James 1:17. 3rd, By enumerating several instances concerning which Scripture affirms particularly, that they have been decreed of God; as the sufferings and death of Christ, Acts 2:23; the glory of those that are to be saved, Eph. 1:4,5; 1Thess. 5:9; and the fore-ordaining of the rest to damnation to be punished for their sin, Jude ver. 4,5. The like may be said of other things which come to pass in time. See Ps. 33:11, and Ps. 115:3, Isa. 46:10, Prov. 19:21. That the liberty and freedom of the will, and contingency of events, is consistent with the decree, is clear from Acts 2:23, 3:17,18; and 4:27,28; Gen. 45:5 (p.20).

Dickson (and undiluted Presbyterianism) would likely be branded as a "hyper-Calvinist" if he lived today! He writes: Note, that the cause of this reprobation is not man's sin, but the absolute will and good pleasure of God. Man's sin indeed is the cause why God will punish, but no occasion why he did ordain to pass by or to punish man. This decree is just, because God has power over man, as the potter hath power over the clay. Neither is the end of this decree the condemnation of the creature, but the manifestation of God's justice. Lastly, sin is the effect of man's free-will, and condemnation is the effect of justice, but the decree of God is the cause of neither (p.22).

If there was one less than satisfying aspect of Dickson's treatment it was the brevity of his dealing with chapter seven of the Confession - "God's Covenant with Man." The material that is covered is excellent and very helpful for our defence of God's one everlasting covenant over against modern dispensationalism, but the absence of a treatment of the covenant

of works and the covenant of grace's free offer is disappointing.

The publisher has included a complete glossary of the heresies Dickson refutes so that one need not be a master of the history of doctrine to read this work with understanding and profit. Consequently, this book will, as a bonus, broaden the reader's knowledge of the history of doctrine and the antithetical nature of God's truth over against error and heresy.

It occurs to me that this book would make a fine study guide on the Confession, and an excellent text that could be used to standardise the pre-confession instruction provided in EPC congregations.

This book certainly deserves a distinguished place in all our libraries and homes.

We thank Matthew and Presbyterian's Armoury Publications for making this important volume available to the church world again.