

Debunking The Declaratory Statement #3

The third article in the Declaratory Statement is as follows:

“That the doctrine of man's total depravity, and of his loss of all ability of will to any. spiritual good accompanying salvation, is not held as implying such a condition of man's nature as would affect his responsibility under the law of God and the Gospel of Christ, or that he may not experience the strivings and restraining influences of the Spirit of God, or that he cannot perform actions in any sense good; though such actions, as not springing from a renewed heart, are not spiritually good or holy, and consequently are not such as accompany salvation.”

If by this it was intended to modify, or tone down, or to adapt to the taste of whole hearted men the Confession doctrine of man's total depravity, then, however inconsistent this may be with the Confession of Faith, it is quite in harmony with the preceding articles in the Statement. Those who are enamoured of the doctrines of universal love, universal atonement, and universal grace cannot receive in its entirety the confession of sin; They cannot but be disposed to modify it. The state of feeling that disposes to the former must demand the latter. At first the attempt to modify will be done with a trembling hand - first attempts will be marked by hesitancy, and will not apparently go very far. This is the characteristic of the third article in the Statement. There is scarcely anything declared in it that does not seem to be said in the Confession. But why should it be deemed necessary to say that the Confession doctrine of man's total depravity is not held as implying such a condition of man's nature as would affect his responsibility, unless the authors of the Statement held that the depravity was not total, and that this was required in order to preserve the responsibility. The Confession has neither declared nor insinuated that rational life has not survived the fall, and its authors were wise enough to know that on this, and not on his spiritual condition, man's responsibility rests. But the authors of the Statement could not see that the utter bondage of the will to sin does not impair the responsibility of him who is enslaved. Reason and conscience survive to act, and these, though spiritually corrupted, are the pillars on which man's responsibility is placed. But what they dare not formulate in a plain statement, they insinuate in a hazy one that there must be some reserve of spiritual power unaffected by, ere responsibility could survive, the fall.

Why add that a man, notwithstanding of his depravity, may experience the strivings and the restraining influences Of the Spirit of God? Is this not as well, and more briefly said in the Confession, which declares that the non-elect may have some common operations of the Spirit? Was the alteration intended as a step nearer to the doctrine of gracious ability bestowed on all who hear the gospel? If not, why was it necessary to make the statement at all? And why was this followed up by another seeming repetition of the words of the Confession, in what is said about the actions of unrenewed men? The repetition here is, however; much less exact. The divergence from the language of the Confession here is manifestly intended to serve a purpose. There is a real and wide difference under the seeming correspondence. In the Confession all works done by unregenerate men are declared to be sinful. The authors of the Statement do not say so - they cannot, they dare not, say so, while saying that they may be in some sense good. True, they say that they cannot be spiritually good or holy, but still they declare that these actions are in some sense good. What a contrast they present in their Statement to what the Westminster divines have given us as their deliverance on this subject! The latter remembered that, when speaking of men's actions they were speaking of what must not be dissociated from the state of the heart out of which they spring. They would not, therefore, call the works of the unregenerate in any sense good. As to the Matter of them, they say that they may be things which God commands, and of good use to them selves and others; but because they proceed not, they add, from a heart purified by faith, nor are done in a right manner, according to the Word, nor to a right end, the glory of God, they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God, or make a man meet to receive grace from God. And yet their neglect of them is more sinful and displeasing to God. Such is the masterly deliverance of the Confession, and this is what is to be laid aside, in order to find a place for the crooked weakling, brought forth in the Declaratory Statement. The men who dared, to this extent, to modify the doctrine of the Confession, regarding total depravity and who, in doing so have shown their incompetence, as well as indicated their Pelagian tendencies, will not stop short of removing more of what the Confession teaches regarding man's ruin by the fall. Their successors may remove it all.

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