

—A Study of the Westminster Confession of Faith—
The Westminster Doctrines of Creation and Providence, WCF 4 and 5

I. Of Creation § 1

A. Everything that exists had a beginning

1. Scripture is very clear that no part of creation exists eternally
 - a) Everything that is had a beginning, Gen 1.1. The great significance of this opening statement of the Bible lies in its teaching that the world had a beginning and that that beginning was entirely in God alone, Ps 102.25
 - b) Scripture speaks of a time when the world did not exist, Jn 17.5, 24; Ps 90.2; Eph 1.4; 2Tim 1.9
2. According to Heb 11.3 it is “through faith” that we believe creation had a beginning and is not eternal. In other words, the creation of the world is a divine revelation that we accept upon the truth of God’s character and Word. Whatever reason or science may claim to the contrary, the revelation of the eternal God remains the foundation of our faith.
3. **Berkhof**: “Creation in the strict sense of the word may be defined as *that free act of God whereby He, according to His sovereign will and for His own glory, in the beginning brought forth the whole visible and invisible universe, without the use of preexistent material, and thus gave it an existence, distinct from His own and yet always dependent on Him.*”
4. All of creation is therefore

B. Creation is the work of the triune God

1. This is one of the peculiar glories and proof of His deity to the exclusion of all other ‘gods’ as idols of men’s imaginations, Isa 37.16; 42.5; 44.24; 45.12; Ps 115.
2. Scripture teaches that no part of creation is self-existent, but everything that is was made by God, Isa 45.18; Neh 9.6; Rom 11.36; Col 1.16; Rev 4.11
 - a) Creation therefore has a distinct existence. It is not God nor any part of God, but something absolutely distinct from God and created by God. Yet the world is ever dependent upon God, who stands above it as Creator and within it as Provider and Sustainer, Eph 4.6
3. Creation is attributed by Scripture:
 - a) to God absolutely, Gen 1.1; 26; 2.4; Ps 115.15; Jer 10.10-12; 32.17; Mk 13.19
 - b) to the Father, 1Cor 8.6
 - c) to the Father through the Son, Heb 1.2
 - d) to the Father through the Spirit, Ps 104.30
 - e) to the Son, Jn 1.2-3
 - f) to the Spirit, Gen 1.2; Job 26.13; 33.4; Isa 40.12-13
4. **Shaw**: “We must not, therefore, suppose that in creation the Father is the principal agent, and the Son and the Holy Ghost [are] inferior agents, or mere instruments. In all external works of Deity, each of the persons of the Godhead equally concur.”
5. **Berkhof**: “The second and third persons [of the Trinity] are not dependent powers or mere intermediaries, but independent authors together with the Father. The work was not divided among the three persons, but the whole work, though from different aspects, is ascribed to each one of the persons. All things are at once *out of* the Father, *through* the Son, and *in* the Holy Spirit. In general it may be said that *being* is out of the Father, *thought* or the *idea* is out of the Son, and *life* out of the Holy Spirit. Since the Father takes the initiative in the work of creation, it is often ascribed to Him economically.”

C. Creation manifests the glory of God’s attributes

1. All that God does He does for the manifestation and display of His own glory, Rom 11.36, and His creating work is no different, Ps 19.1

2. Thus creation reveals the glory of God's divine attributes, not only manifesting Him to be God, and not only adding cause for His people to worship and give thanks to Him (Pss 33.5; 104.24, 33-34), but also rendering inexcusable all who refuse to worship Him as God, Rom 1.19-20
 - a) **Van Dixhoorn**: "Although this creation does not provide the good news of the gospel, it does provide us with material for preaching repentance to those who ignore God's testimony, and for defending the faith against those who deny His existence."
 - b) **Van Dixhoorn**: "The created world supplies us with endless material for songs of praise to God's glory."
 3. The account of creation by God in Genesis 1 is the beginning and basis of all divine revelation, and consequently also the foundation of all ethical and religious life.
 - a) In other words, in the words of **Berkhof**, "the doctrine of creation is not set forth in Scripture as a philosophical solution to the problem of the world, but in its ethical and religious significance, as a revelation of the relation of man to his God. It stresses the fact that God is the origin of all things, and that all things belong to Him and are subject to Him."
- D. Creation was made of nothing, Heb 11.3
1. Man feverishly studies creation in search of the answer to creation's beginning. Since creation points to God as its Creator, Rom 1.19-20, one would think man's search would be easily satisfied. But the problem is this: man is in rebellion against the Creator and cannot follow creation's pointers to God without condemning himself as a rebel under God's judgment. Man therefore chooses a different solution: begin by denying God's existence, make idols for worship, and ascribe the glory and attributes of God to the creation itself (e.g., self-existence, eternity, divinity).
 2. Although creation points to God for its *beginning*, it cannot reveal *how* it was made; but God has told us in the Scriptures that He made all things out of nothing, Heb 11.3
 - a) The phrase "out of nothing" (or *ex nihilo*) is not a biblical phrase. It is actually found in the Apocrypha. But it is employed by the Confession to capture the biblical testimony that all things were brought about by the Word of God and not from any pre-existing material, Gen 1.3, 6-7. 20-21 (cf. WSC 9).
 - (1) **Calvin**: "Creation is...the origination out of nothing of essence."
 - b) This confession does not contradict the creation of man's body out of the (pre-existing) dust of the ground, or the shaping of the original "waters" (Gen 1.2) into subsequent forms. Rather, it encompasses the original creation of all things out of nothing in Gen 1.1 *as well as* the formation of what was created into its present forms by the word of His power. Reformed theologians therefore usually make a distinction between the initial act of creation *ex nihilo* and the subsequent creative acts *ex materia*, and speak of creation and formation.
 - c) **Dick**: "[Gen 1.1] must be understood to refer to the original production of matter by His almighty power. "In the beginning," or at the commencement of time, he made out of nothing the matter of which the heavens and the earth were composed, and upon which their present form was afterwards superinduced. This, I think, is the natural way of explaining the words; and, according to this view of them, the Bible opens with an ascription of the act of creation to God."
 - d) **Dick**: "The subsequent verses of [Gen 1] give an account of the order in which matter already existing [by creation] was disposed."
 - e) **Warfield**: "With Calvin, while the perfecting of the world...is a process, creation, strictly conceived, tended to be thought of as an act. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth": after that it was not "creation" strictly so called, but "formation," gradual modeling into form, which took place.... He was inclined to draw a sharp distinction in kind between the primal act of creation of the heavens and the earth out of nothing, and the subsequent acts of moulding this created material into the forms in was destined to take."

3. Time is a finite product of God's creation and was necessarily created with the heavens and the earth.
 - a) **Berkhof**: "Time is only one of the forms of all created existence, and therefore could not exist before creation."
 - b) There was no time—or succession of finite moments—before creation, since the world was brought into being *with* time rather than *in* time. Likewise, there was no space before creation, since the space which creation occupies is a product of its existence.
 - (1) Space and time are therefore qualities of finite being and have come into existence and will pass out of existence with finite being. *Infinite* space or *infinite* time is a contradiction of terms, an impossibility, since both of them are by nature finite and created.
 - c) Prior to the *beginning* mentioned in Gen 1.1, we must postulate a beginningless eternity, during which God only existed, Ps 90.2
 4. A difficulty arises for some in that a creation implies a change in God.
 - a) To the objection that a creation in time implies a change in God, **Warfield** quotes Wollebius as reminding us that "creation is not the Creator's but the creature's passage from potentiality to actuality." In other words, creation did not involve a change in God, but was merely a visible work of Him who is always working, Jn 5.17.
 - b) To think of God as inactive or passive before creation and then of creation as a change in God is to misunderstand the divine Being.
- E. Creation includes all things whether visible or invisible, Acts 17.24; Col 1.16
1. This recognizes that creation includes an invisible aspect which we cannot see, an invisible aspect which includes the angelic host.
 - a) **Warfield**: "Moses, it is true, in the history of creation, does not give any account of their creation; but that history does not pretend to be complete, but limits itself to the visible creation."
 2. It is the traditional view of the Reformed Churches that the angels were created as part of the heavens, since they are a heavenly host (Job 38.4-7); but when and on what day can only be a matter of speculation since it is unrevealed.
 - a) **Van Mastricht**: "It is certain that they were not created before the first day of creation since before that there was nothing but eternity...and it is equally certain that they were not created after man, whom they seduced."
 3. All the angels owe their existence to God. Their dependence upon Him is absolute. Nothing can be ascribed to them as if it belonged to them apart from Him. They are immortal, but this only means that it is the will of God to sustain them in endless being.
 4. In all their activities, they are but the instruments of God, who uses their ministry and service in the executing of all that He has decreed. We must therefore not think of them as interposed between us and God; nor must we ascribe to them what belongs to God alone (Rev 19.10; 22.9)
 - a) **Dick**: "God employs angels in the administration of the affairs of providence; not, however, because he stands in need of their assistance, but for reasons with which we are not fully acquainted."
 - b) **Dick**: "Christians should be grateful for the care of God exercised towards them by the ministry of angels, and should admire that wonderful economy which has united the two great families of heaven and earth, which sin had separated and inspired with aversion and hostility. What a high honour is conferred upon them, in having such guardians! How safe are they under their protection! and with what caution and reverence should they act in the presence of witnesses so august and holy!"
- F. Creation was made *very good* by God, Gen 1.31
1. This does not mean that finite and material things possessed an absolute perfection nor even that they possessed the highest excellence consistent with their creation. It means that all things were

excellent according to their kinds and the whole creation was perfectly good with reference to the general and special design of God in creating.

2. It is critical that we understand this point, given not only the evil that fills the world, but the evil nature of man and devils. As God is the author of all creation, everything that has come into being is necessarily in its nature good, because God is good and cannot create anything evil.
 - a) There is therefore no such thing in the universe as an evil nature. All that is evil arises not from nature, but from the corruption of nature by sin. And this corruption has been introduced into creation by the free—and permitted—act of the creature. Both man and the devils have caused their own depravation.
 - b) **Dick**: “The moral qualities of [fallen angels] have undergone a total change. Of their original holiness not a vestige remains. Sin is now so natural to them that it seems almost to be their essence; it is the element in which they live and move. Sin is the subject of their thoughts, and gives a character to all their actions. Evil is their only good. There is an important difference between them and men.... The depravity of men is in some degree checked and concealed by certain natural feelings and affections, which...the wisdom of God has permitted to remain.... But we have no ground to believe that there is any thing analogous to these affections and feelings in apostate angels. Sin rages in them unrestrained.”
 - c) **Calvin**: “We must always reserve this—that the evil which is in the devils proceeds from themselves.... For we know that the devil is evil not by nature, nor from his original creation, but by the fault of his own defection.” This argues not only for the biblical doctrine of devils, but also for the biblical doctrine of the origin of evil.
 - d) **Calvin**: “The evil of the fallen angels is not from creation but from depravation.” “At their original creation they were angels of God, but they destroyed themselves through degeneration.” The Scriptural evidence of their fall is in 2Pet 2.4 and Jude 6.
 - e) **Warfield**: “To put it all in a nutshell, evil, according to Calvin, has its source not in the creative act of God, but in the deflected act of the creaturely will. Such an assertion takes us, of course, only a little way towards a theodicy; but it is important that as we pass we should note as a first step in Calvin’s theodicy that he very energetically repudiates the notion that God, who is good, can be, as Creator, the author of any evil thing. All that comes from His hand is “very good”.”

G. Creation was a free act of God, Eph 1.11

1. Some have represented creation as a necessary act of God rather than a free act determined by His sovereign will. They represent creation as a necessary act of His power or a necessary act of His love or as a necessary act in pursuit of His glory, lest His glory never be displayed. But this is not a Scriptural position.
2. Whatever necessity may be ascribed to the external acts of God, is a necessity conditioned upon the divine decree. In other words, creation—like the incarnation of Christ to redeem it after it was fallen—only became necessary after God decreed and purposed it. It is therefore a necessity dependent upon the sovereign will of God and therefore not an absolute necessity, Rev 4.11. God is self-sufficient and not dependent upon His creatures in any way, Job 22.2-3; Acts 17.25.
3. **Dick**: “When we say that [God] made all things for himself...it is evident that we do not mean that they were necessary to him, or that he derives any benefit from them.”

H. Creation was made in the space of six days

1. Following the language of Scripture (Ex 20.11), the Confession states that God performed the work of creation *in six days*. Since this wording is the Scriptural testimony we are wise to adopt and affirm it as God’s revelation of truth to us.
2. But it has always been a matter of intense discussion in Christ’s Church just how long these six days were.
 - a) The majority in Church history have held that they were 24-hour days because this is what our days are and we have no reason to suppose that God would mean anything different,

- especially since Gen 1 speaks of morning and evening combining to make up a *day* and since Ex 20.8-11 declares that God's six-day creation week followed by one day of rest is the pattern for our six-day work week followed by one day of rest.
- b) Others have held that each of the days represent a long period, maybe even millions of years, since the word "day" in Scripture need not necessarily mean 24-hours (e.g. Gen 2.4; Job 14.5-6; Zeph 1.14).
 - c) Still others have held that the days are of an indeterminate length and that the pattern they offer to our own week in Ex 20.8-11 is an analogical one rather than an identical one.
3. Some of the members of the Westminster Assembly would have preferred that the wording of the Confession be more precise, indicating that God created the world in six 24-hour days, for this was the view held by the majority of the divines. Nevertheless, in recognition of the difficulties present within the creation account itself, in an effort to preserve unity, and in the exercise of charity, the wording is left as Scripture gives it to us: *in the space of six days*.
 - a) **Ferguson**: "The only access we have to exegeting what the divines specifically meant is in their writings regarding creation. In those writings we see that they're conscious of a variety of views of creation in the church. What they're most emphasizing is their refusal to agree with Augustine's interpretation of it as a way of describing what was actually instantaneous. Hence, they say it was something that happened over a period of time. If you ask them how important was it that we say they were 24-hour days, you'll find that many don't even touch the issue. The length of days wasn't a significant issue at their time. Their interest is much more theological. So their chief interest is what they *affirm* rather than *deny*: they affirm the progressive rather than instantaneous character of creation."
 4. *It's important to understand that the theology of creation and the theology of God's sovereignty and goodness displayed in creation remain fundamentally the same regardless of the length of the days themselves. In other words, nothing is lost or gained theologically by the length of the day.
 - a) It is in recognition of this and of the legitimate difficulties in Gen 1 itself that resulted in both the PCA (2000) and the OPC (2004) adopting a Creation Report in which the four major views on the length of the days were accepted as being orthodox and neither unbiblical nor unconfessional.
 - b) No acceptable view on the length of the days should be a litmus test for another's orthodoxy or purity. The difficulties in interpretation arise from the text itself as well as from the book of creation given to us by God. Charity should be exercised here regarding the beginning of the world as well as in the different views regarding the end of the world. We must each strive, in good conscience, for that view which is most agreeable to Scripture.
 5. **Hodge** judiciously acknowledges the following facts which ought to prescribe our theology of creation with regard to the length of the days of creation:
 - a) The record in Genesis 1 has been given by divine revelation and is therefore infallibly true.
 - b) The book of revelation (special revelation) and the book of creation (general revelation) are both from God and therefore both true and will be found, when both are adequately interpreted, to be in perfect agreement.
 - c) The facts upon which geology and astronomy are based are continuing to be collected and and interpreted in light of each other.
 - d) The record in Genesis was designed by God to lay a theological foundation for Himself as the Creator and God of all things and man as responsible to and dependent upon Him.
 - e) The record in Genesis was not designed by God either to prevent or to take the place of a scientific discovery and interpretation of creation. Apparent discrepancies in established truths can only be the result of imperfect knowledge. God requires us both to believe His testimony and to learn from His creation. He imposes upon us at present the necessity of humility and patience.

6. Regardless of our view on the length of the days of creation, we should acknowledge the following facts in our interpretation:
- a) Scripture nowhere explicitly states that the days of creation were 24-hours long.
 - b) The first three days of creation cannot be measured by the sun and the earth's rotation around it since the sun was not created until the fourth day.
 - c) The creation week is not six, but seven days long, and the days must therefore necessarily all be of the same kind, nature, or length. Yet, the seventh day, the day of God's rest is never said to have an end. This is because the *day* commenced on the seventh day is not a day of mere 24-hour rest, after which God would return to His creating work again; rather, the *day* ended by the close of the sixth day is the *day* of God's creating work (Gen 2.4) and the *day* commenced by the beginning of the seventh day is the day of God's providential or even redemptive work, which goes on to the end of time (Heb 11.3). The Sabbath rest upon which God entered on the seventh day continues eternally and is the rest towards which our weekly Sabbath points (Heb 4.9-11).
 - d) God's creation week and subsequent rest is the pattern for our weekly work-rest cycle. But this pattern need not be one of exact *identity*—and given God's unending day of rest, it cannot be one of identity, but therefore must be one of *analogy*. God's cycle of six days of work and rest followed by one day of longer rest is analogous to our cycle of six days of work and rest followed by a longer day of rest.
 - (1) In other words, God's pattern is one of *rhythm* and not one of exact hours. The days of creation in Gen 1 are *really* days, because they match and provide the pattern for the human rhythm. But how long they took in *hours* is a secondary question, one which Scripture does not answer and one which Gen 1 does not define.
 - (2) Arguably, they were not 24-hours long, given the very means to measure a day by hours was not created by God until the fourth day and given the last day of the seven was not marked by God as having ever ended, but was shown to be an ongoing one.
 - (3) At the same time, the days *may* all have been 24-hours long; but they also *may not* have been. Since Gen 1 *does not say*, we are left to wrestle with what the text *says* and to arrive at an interpretation, in good conscience, that best fits what the text actually *says*, while remaining true to what the rest of Scripture teaches regarding this passage.
 - e) Let us ever remember that the 24-hour day view, the mature creation view, the day-age view, the analogical day view, and the framework view *all* affirm the main theological truths of Gen 1-2 and all hold to the four-fold view of creation confessed in WSC 9:
 - (1) God created all things of nothing (*ex nihilo*)
 - (2) God created all things by the word of His power
 - (3) God created all things in the space of six days
 - (4) God created all things very good.
 - f) If the Scriptures specifically taught that the days of creation were 24-hours long, the *mature creation view* would be the most attractive. But since the Scriptures never state this as a fact, and since the exegetical evidence in Gen 1-2 argues so strongly against the days being 24-hours long and for an analogical rather than an identical relation between God's days and man's, the *analogical day view* is arguably the most attractive.

II. Of Creation § 2

A. Man was clearly the last of God's creative acts (Gen 1.27-2.1), which strongly marks his dignity as the vicegerent of creation and God's bounty in preparing all of creation for him before he was brought into existence. The earth was designed, completely prepared, and amply furnished for his reception before he was made.

1. **Hodge:** "Man's true place is last in order as the immediate end and crown of this lower creation."

2. **Dick:** “When the earth was prepared by the hand of the Almighty, adorned with its sublime and beautiful scenery, and enriched by His liberality, man was introduced into it as his dwelling, and placed at the head of its other inhabitants.” “The creation of man took place on the sixth day, and was delayed till that time, that the earth might be prepared for his reception.”
 - a) Man’s body was fashioned by God out of the dust He had created earlier but his soul came im-mediately from God (Gen 2.7).
 - b) Let us therefore never forget that we are not the Creator. As privileged and distinguished and exalted as man is over and above all the rest of creation, man remains a creature—a creature made from dust. And despite all that we’re destined for by the grace and redeeming work of God in Christ, we’ll never be more than a creature and the Creator-creature distinction will never be erased.
 - c) **Dick:** “The body of man was made of the dust, or of the earth, and hence the name **Adam** seems to be derived. The reason for forming it of such mean materials, seems to have been to teach him humility, when, amidst the honors which were to be conferred upon him, as Lord of the inferior creatures, he should reflect that, in one respect, he had the same origin as the beasts of the field. It was calculated also to awaken sentiments of devotion, while he contemplated in his own body an admirable proof of the wisdom and goodness of God, who had constructed a frame of such curious workmanship out of the dust which our first parent was daily treading under his feet (Ps 139.14).”
 - d) Man is thus made of two constituent parts, body and soul (or spirit) and will therefore live eternally (despite the temporary separation caused by death) as a “bipartisan” being. Being directly from God, his soul is his highest and prized part and his body should therefore be subject to the soul’s interests and welfare (Mk 8.36-37).
 - e) Man’s possession of an eternal soul is in order that he might glorify and enjoy God forever. Nothing else in all creation has this place.
 - (1) **Van Dixhoorn:** “We are different...in that we have immortal souls; a life like, but also unlike animals (Gen 2.7)... When we die, our spirits return to the God who gave them to us (Ecc 12.7). The most savage animal will turn to dust, but a savage man will have to answer to the one who made heaven and hell (Mt 10.28). It is a grave reality that the death of a human being is not the death of his soul.”
- B. God created man male and female, Gen 1.27
1. The high point of creation, the crowning work of the creative week, is not the creation of a man, but the creation of a human pair, a married pair. The entire human race, in all its varieties, descended from this first marriage (Acts 17.26) and then, after the flood, from the family of Noah (Gen 9.1-2, 18-19).
 - a) That all men descended by generation from Adam and Eve is necessarily established by the biblical doctrine of original sin, Rom 5.12, in which all men received their guilt from and in Adam.
 2. God’s creation of male and female counterparts as the first couple, family, and marriage, establishes the form and pattern for all marriages and relationships. Same-sex unions are therefore a perversion of God’s good creation and can in no way be called a marriage. Instead, they reveal man’s depravation and God’s judgment upon man’s refusal to submit to Him, Rom 1.21-28
- C. God created man in His own image, WSC 10
1. Man was distinguished from all other creation, being created in God’s image with a reasonable and immortal soul, able to know, commune with, enjoy, and obey God.
 2. **Shaw:** This cannot consist in a participation of the divine essence, because that is incommunicable to any creature. Neither did it consist in his external form; for God, having no bodily parts, could not be represented by any material resemblance. The image of God consisted

- partly in the *spirituality* of the soul of man...likewise in the *dominion* assigned to him...but principally in his *conformity* to the moral perfections of God.
3. What exactly the image of God entails is to be gathered from Eph 4.24 and Col 3.10, which outline the image of God to which redeemed man is restored. If in Christ fallen man is restored to the image of God “in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness,” then this must be the image in which he was originally created and from which he fell by sin.
 - a) **Shaw:** “Man had knowledge in his understanding, righteousness in his will, and holiness in his affections.” But by sin, his knowledge of God’s will was darkened, his will was enslaved to sin, and his affections were set on evil as if it were good, Ecc 7.29
 - b) Though the image of God was irreparably marred by man’s fall, it was not lost (Gen 9.6; Js 3.9; Rom 1.20; 2.14-15). It is part and parcel of his humanity and will be part of man’s account on judgment day that he so poorly cared for this “talent”.
 4. **Van Dixhoorn:** “It is because of this image that the fall of man is so horrific. We see in Adam and Eve’s rebellion not only the crowning part of creation dissatisfied with its crown, but the very image of God rebelling against God himself.”
 5. **Van Dixhoorn:** Man being made in God’s image “has implications for the way in which we live.... It speaks today for those who would end the lives of unborn children, avoid the company of people from another race, argue for the superiority of one gender over another, or care about chimps more than children. The image of God is important for ethics: it is as much an equalizer among humans as it is an ‘elevator’ over all other creatures.”
- D. God furnished man with sufficient knowledge for his obedience.
1. **Hodge:** “That God should have furnished Adam with sufficient knowledge for his guidance is necessarily implied in the fact that Adam was a holy moral agent and God a righteous moral Governor.”
 2. Besides being made in the image of God, our first parents had the law of God written on their hearts by the Spirit (Rom 2.14-15) and the power to fulfill it (Ecc 7.29).
 - a) “Having the law of God written in their hearts and power to fulfill it.”
 - (1) God’s “breathing into” man means more than that man was given physical life and must be taken to mean that man was created as the temple of God’s Spirit.
 - (2) Adam enjoyed the image and life of God from the Spirit of life given to him and was in a position to reach, by his obedience, the full perfection of his being as the temple of God’s Spirit.
 - (3) When Adam sinned, the Spirit of God withdrew from the human heart and man became mere “flesh” (Gen 6.3; Jude 19) and the image of God was marred beyond recognition.
 - (4) Christ, as the Second Adam, is given the Spirit without measure (Jn 3.34) so that He can be the *medium* of giving the Spirit to His people, restoring them as temples of God’s Spirit (Acts 2.33). It is therefore by regeneration that the Spirit of God returns to dwell in man’s soul and works to renew the image of God, Eph 4.24; Col 3.10.
 3. In addition to God’s general revelation, written on man’s heart, God added special revelation, the revelation of a positive command of His will to them (Gen 2.17; 3.8-11, 23). This was given as a probationary test of his obedience to his Creator and God.
 - a) This command revealed a covenant relationship into Adam was created and a representative role in which Adam stood.
 - (1) Upon obedience, Adam would have secured his communion with God, God’s blessing to all he represented, and his place as God’s vicegerent over all creation.
 - (2) Upon his disobedience, he would be forever separated from God, forfeiting the Spirit given to him, come under the curse of the covenant and the devil’s captivity, and lose his place in creation.

- b) It's impossible to know how long our first parents continued before transgressing, but it was surely the most blessed season and communion they had known. They found joy in God and joy in thinking His thoughts after Him. The problem started when they did not.
 - (1) It would seem that whenever the fall happened, it happened after the commencement of the seventh day. For at the end of the sixth day, God declared of all His work that it was very good, which He could hardly have done if sin had already introduced death and misery into the world. Moreover, it would seem that Adam and Eve knew something of the blessing of communion with their Creator, something of peace with their God, before losing it and hiding from Him in fear.
- c) **Ferguson**: "There was nothing either inherent in Adam or in the nature of the tree that expressed the rule not to eat—it came entirely from God and therefore formed the single challenge to Adam to do something because God said to do it. In everything else, it was natural to him to do the will of God."

E. God created man capable of falling.

- 1. Man's moral condition was perfect in that it was without flaw (Gen 1.31), but in the wisdom of God it was also mutable (Ecc 7.29). It would be secured by obedience and corrupted by disobedience.
- 2. **Ferguson**: "The injection of a law that is additional to the law imprinted on man's heart simultaneously creates the possibility of growth in obedience on the one hand and lapse into sin on the other."

I. Of Providence § 1

A. The nature of providence

- 1. Although God gave a real and permanent existence to the things He created, and although He gave them properties and efficiency as second causes to produce the effects proper to them; yet, nothing in God's creation is self-existent. The ground of their continued existence is in God and not in them, Acts 17.28; Rom 11.36. This continued preserving, sustaining, and governing His creation is the doctrine of providence, Col 1.17; Heb 1.3; Pss 66.8-9; 63.8; 36.6; 115.3; Dan 4.35
 - a) **Van Dixhoorn**: "God's upholding of creation is not a basic maintenance program."
- 2. God's providential control of all things is the consistent execution of the eternal and immutable purpose of His perfect decree, Eph 1.11; Isa 28.29; Acts 15.18
 - a) **Dick**: "The word providence... is used to express the action or conduct of God towards the universe, which he upholds by his power and regulates by his wisdom. The question concerning providence is whether, as there was a Creator, there is also a Ruler of the world; or whether the heavens and the earth are under the superintendence of him who brought them into existence."
 - b) **Dick**: "Providence is the care which God takes of all things, to uphold them in being, and to direct them to the ends which he has determined to accomplish by them, so that *nothing* takes place in which he is not concerned in a manner worthy of his infinite perfections, and which is not in unison with the counsel of his will."
- 3. **Shaw**: "That there is a providence may be inferred from the nature and perfections of God; from the dependent nature of the creatures; from the continued order and harmony visible in all parts of the universe; from the remarkable judgments that have been inflicted on wicked men, and the signal deliverances that have been granted to the Church and people of God; and from the prediction of future events, and their exact fulfillment, Ps 103.19; Eph 1.11"
- 4. The government of God may be considered in a twofold view: *natural* and *moral*.
 - a) The irrational and inanimate creatures are subjects of His natural government.
 - b) The rational part of the creation, or those creatures who are the fit subjects of moral law, as angels and men, are the subjects of His moral government.

B. The universal scope of providence

1. Scripture clearly teaches that God’s providence extends to all creatures, actions, and things. Nothing is outside of God’s providential preserving and governing. Nothing happens without God. Nothing happens contrary to His will, for all things happen according to His governance. From the smallest to the greatest, all things are preserved and governed by God, Mt 10.29-31.
 - a) It extends to the inanimate creation, Pss 104.14; 119.91; Job 38.31-38
 - b) It extends to the whole animal creation, Ps 104.27-28
 - c) It extends to the angels, both good (Heb 1.14) and bad (Job 1.12; Mk 5.9-13)
 - d) It extends to the affairs of nations, Job 12.19, 23; Dan 4.25
 - e) It extends to the affairs of families, Pss 68.6; 107.39, 41; Acts 17.26
 - f) It extends to individuals, Acts 17.28; Job 14.5
 2. Was the fall foreknown by God?
 - a) **Dick:** The revolution caused by the fall into sin, “which seemed to defeat the design of God in creation, could not have taken place without his knowledge, nor without his permission; for there is no doubt that, as he could have prevented our first parents from being tempted, so he could have enabled them to resist the strongest temptation. Mysterious as the subject is, we must believe that, although we cannot say that God willed sin, he willed not to hinder it, and that it was his purpose to overrule it for an end worth of himself. It follows that his providence was concerned in the fall; although we may not be able to describe the nature and extent of its agency.”
- C. The goal of providence is the manifestation of His glory, Rom 9.17; 11.36
1. **Dick:** “As the doctrine of a particular providence is agreeable both to Scripture and to reason, so it is recommended by its obvious tendency to promote the piety and the consolation of mankind. To a God who governed the world solely by general laws, we might have looked up with reverence, but not with the confidence, and gratitude and hope, which arises from the belief that he superintends its minutest affairs. The thought that he ‘compasses our paths and is acquainted with all our ways’; that he watches our steps, and orders all the events in our lot; guides and protects us, and supplies our wants, as it were, with his own hand; this thought awakens a train of sentiments and feelings highly favorable to devotion, and sheds a cheering light upon the path of life. We consider him as our Guardian and our Father; and, reposing upon his care, we are assured that, if we trust in him, no evil shall befall us, and no real blessing shall be withheld.”

II. Of Providence §§ 2-3

- A. How does God’s providence relate to God’s foreknowledge and decree?
1. **Van Dixhoorn:** “God’s perfect providence is the working out of His perfect predestination.” God’s will is the First Cause of all things as well as the Executor of that will.
 2. Since God’s providence is the execution, in time, of His eternal decree, all things decreed and foreknown by God necessarily come to pass immutably and infallibly (Acts 2.23).
 3. God’s governance never faces an impasse and never fails to bring about His eternal purpose. His wisdom in purposing and His power in accomplishing are equally perfect, Job 23.13; Ps 33.11; Lam 2.17. No single detail of God’s plan will be changed as His plan comes to pass in time.
 4. In other words, His providence in time is absolutely consistent with His eternal purpose and decree.
- B. God did not see fit to remain the only, the direct, and the immediate cause of all events in creation, but was pleased to preserve and govern His creation by the use and nature of second causes. Some second causes are necessary, others are free, and others are contingent, and God governs perfectly over them all in the bringing about of His wise and good will. Thus the principle of absolute sovereignty shouldn’t lead us to deny the principle of secondary causation or the responsibility of rational agents.
1. Those which are necessary include the luminaries in the sky and the seasons of the year, Gen 8.22; Jer 31.35. Every part of the world has an immediate dependence on the will and power of

God, but He governs the material world by certain physical laws; and according to these laws certain effects uniformly and necessarily follow certain causes.

- a) **Dick:** “What are the laws of nature? They are the particular modes in which the Deity exerts his power, which, being uniform, are accounted natural, while any deviation from them is pronounced to be miraculous. If this be a just description of them...it follows that [the laws of nature] are so far from accounting for the order which is maintained in the universe, that they necessarily imply the actual and constant interposition of the Creator, and as irresistibly suggest the idea of a Lawgiver, as do the laws of any human society.”
 2. Those which are free include a man’s choice to preserve his life or not by running to the city of refuge, Ex 21.13; Dt 19.5
 3. Those which are contingent include the truthfulness of Micaiah’s words being contingent upon Ahab’s death, 1Kgs 22.28, 34
- C. **Note:** it’s important to understand that God definitely decrees how events contingent upon secondary causes will turn out. By using secondary causes, God is not turning these or any events over to chance or fate—neither of which can exist. Rather, the use of secondary causes, whether necessary, free, or contingent, is a free choice *within* the immutable decree itself, the outcome of which is absolutely certain, *not because* of the secondary cause, *but by* use of the secondary cause.
1. Moreover, in the case of rational creatures, God’s providential governance is not destructive of their rational liberty, because they are never under any compulsion, but act freely.
 2. **Shaw:** “Though there is no even contingent with respect to God, “who declares the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things which are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure”; yet many events are contingent or accidental with regard to us, and also with respect to second causes.”
 3. **Ferguson:** “The principle that they want to establish is that we must never draw the false conclusion from the principle of the absolute sovereignty and universality of God in providence that God’s sovereignty minimizes the significance of historical realities, personal responsibilities, and causation.”
- D. God ordinarily uses ordinary means to bring about His will, Isa 55.10; Hos 2.21-22, but He is free to work miraculously as He chooses.
1. In other words, God is not bound or restricted to any means. God is free to work without (Mt 4.4), above (Rom 4.19-20), and even against them (2Kgs 6.6; Dan 3.27) according to His pleasure. Miracles are therefore part of God’s providential governance as He pleases.
 - a) **Hodge:** “A miracle, although effected by divine power without means, is itself a means to an end and part of a plan. All natural law has its birth in the divine reason, and is an expression of will to effect a purpose. In this highest, all-comprehensive sense of the word, miracles also are according to law—they are fixed in their occurrence by God’s eternal plan.... Thus the order of nature and miracles, instead of being in conflict, are the intimately correlated elements of one comprehensive system.”
 2. Though God is free to work miraculously, since He has appointed means for our use, we are bound to use those means and if we neglect them, we cannot expect to obtain the end.
 3. Our comfort is that God is in control and that God does not act arbitrarily, but according to His promises and character, which call for our faith and trust.

III. Of Providence § 4

- A. One of the means God uses to bring about His will is evil, not as the Author or Approver of evil, but as the sovereign Governor over it. In this section the Confession affirms that the providence of God not only governs the sinful actions of moral creatures, but necessarily extends to include the fall itself, Gen 45.5; 50.20; Acts 2.23. And yet two things are equally preserved:

1. God's governance over sin is not a bare, passive permission, but a true governing, so that it unfolds exactly as He would have it, and a limiting and overruling, so that it accomplishes that good, wise, and holy end for which He gave it a place in His decree, Gen 50.20; Acts 4.27-28
 - a) **Van Dixhoorn**: "God rules over sin and sinners. God decides the extent to which sin will reign and the extent to which it will be restrained in his world, and in the life of every man, woman, and child."
 - b) **Hodge**: "The providence of God, instead of causing sin or approving it, is constantly concerned in forbidding it by positive law, in discouraging it by threatenings and actual punishments, in restraining it, and in overruling it against its own nature to good"
2. God's governance is such that the sinfulness of the action proceeds entirely from the creature and not from God, since He neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin, Js 1.13, 14, 17; 1Jn 2.16; Ps 1.21
3. The full exposition of this subject so as to remove all difficulty surpasses the human capacities. **Shaw**: "We are certain God is concerned in all the actions of His creatures; we are equally certain that God cannot be the author of sin; and here we ought to rest."

IV. Of Providence §§ 5-7 (The Pastoral Implications of God's Providence)

- A. In these three final paragraphs we are reminded that God actually uses sin and suffering for His people's good, that He uses surprising blessings for the just punishment of the wicked, and that He works all things for the special good of His church.
 1. **Ferguson**: "Note the way they describe God: wise, righteous and gracious—this is the first thing a person who endures something difficult must hear so he won't extrapolate from the excruciating character of his experience an excruciating character of God. So, lesson number one is: fix your mind upon the character of God as He's revealed in Scripture and particularly in Jesus Christ."
 2. **Ferguson**: "Note the nature of the experiences: temporary (only for a season), varied (manifold), there's a fatherly purpose even here (chastise: parental language)."
- B. § 5—God cannot possibly tempt any man to sin, because this is inconsistent with His pure and holy nature, Js 1.13-14. However, in righteous judgment, God sometimes permits persons, and even His own children, to fall into one sin for the punishment of another (2Sam 24.1).
 1. Likewise, God sometimes—though never finally, and but for a season and to a degree—withdraws His spiritual influences and leaves them for a season to temptations and to the lusts of their own hearts; not because He delights to see them fall into sin, but because He would have them see more of the sin which is actually in their own hearts (2Chr 32.31) and more of the grace which is actually in His own Son.
 2. The intent is to increase their repentance for sin and their faith in Christ as well as their watchfulness against sin, dependence upon God, and humility before God and men, 2Cor 12.7-9; Lk 22.32; Heb 12.5-16
- C. § 6—God can work evil for good, but God can also work good for evil; and this He often does in the lives of the wicked.
 1. In an act of judgment upon the wicked, God often not only withholds softening grace, but also withdraws what natural and common restraints they had, turning them over to increasing wickedness in this life, Rom 1.24-28, such that the truths of the gospel and the ordinances of the church, while working grace in His own, only increases condemnation in others.
 - a) The Puritans used to say that "afflictions are a man's knife with which he can either cut his meat or his throat." The godly can grow through their trials whereas the ungodly won't.
 2. In other words, there are already in the present world (in the providence of God) adumbrations of His final judgment: blinding, hardening, withholding His grace, etc., which is strikingly brought out in Romans 1.

3. The important thing to understand here is that no Christian is given glasses to perfectly read and interpret the providences of God. We must ever stand, for our faith and comfort, not upon providences, but upon the truth of God's Word and the character of our God which we read within it.

D. § 7—God's providence extends to the church in a most special way. Even when He must chastise them and discipline them, He takes care of His people with the utmost love of a father and tenderness of a mother, Rom 8.28. As those who love God, we may be sure that His holy, wise, and perfect providence will work for our good and His glory.

V. Some Practical Implications for the Saints from John Flavel's *Mystery of Providence*

- A. Look to the hand of God in all that befalls you; for neither your comforts nor your afflictions arise from the ground, but all comes to you from your Heavenly Father, to whom you then owe praise, thanksgiving, trust, and faith.
- B. Praise God for His condescension to care for you.
- C. You are obliged to perform all duties and services to God, who every minute of your lives is caring for you. Be fruitful for Him who is fruitful for you.
- D. Don't distrust God when difficulties arise. No man ever lacked that mercy which he had the faith to wait for from God. God is to be judged by His promises, not by His providences.
- E. Seek everything from God by prayer and do nothing without God's blessing on it, for all things come from Him.
- F. Learn to please God since everything you need must come from His hands. Fear nothing but sin; study nothing so much as how to please God.

Bibliography:

An Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith, Robert Shaw

The Confession of Faith, A. A. Hodge

Confessing the Faith, Chad Van Dixhoorn

A Summary of Christian Doctrine, Louis Berkhof

Lectures on Theology, John Dick

Calvin's Doctrine of Creation, B. B. Warfield

Westminster Standards class at WTS 2001, Sinclair Ferguson

Assignments:

*Read Chapters Four and Five in Hodge—the questions at the end of the chapter should be used as a review

*Read Chapters Four and Five in the WCF, paying close attention to the Scripture proofs

*Memorize Shorter Catechism questions 9-11

*Memorize:

The doctrine of creation: Gen 1.1, 31; Ps 33.6; John 1.3; Heb 11.3; Neh 9.6

The chief end of creation: Isa 43.6-7; Ps 19.1; Ps 148.13; Rom 11.36

On angels: Heb 1.14; Jude 6

On man: Gen 1.26-27; Ecc 7.29; Rom 2.14-15; Eph 4.24; Col 3.10;

The doctrine of providence: Neh 9.6; Gen 8.22; Acts 2.23; Js 1.13-14

—The next class will meet, DV, at 8AM on 11 April for a study of WCF 6: The Fall of Man