

PETER HIETT'S EXCEPTIONS TO THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION

Dear Friends,

I still “sincerely receive and adopt the Westminster Confession of Faith... as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures.” Furthermore, I do not “find myself out of accord with any of the *Essentials of the Faith*.” I’m also unable to articulate a change in my views since the “assumption of my ordination vows.” Since my ordination I have become more convinced of certain things, yet have always had reservations in the areas which I will articulate below.

Having said this, I understand that it is now my duty to inform you of any statements in the Westminster Confession to which I cannot subscribe. Below are some areas of the Confession with which I struggle and some statements with which I cannot completely subscribe:

1. Chapter 3.7 states, “...it **pleased** God not to call the rest of mankind and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin...” I am unclear as to who “the rest of mankind” are, but whoever they are, Scripture states that “he (The Lord) does not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men” (Lam. 3:33). Ezekiel 18:23, “Have I any **pleasure** in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?” Chapter 35.2 of our confession states that God desires “that all men should be saved.” I realize that there are great mysteries here and that the English language has changed since the seventeenth century, but it seems misguided to use the word “pleased” in a confessional document in reference to God’s internal state regarding the act of damning the wicked.
2. Chapter 10.4 reads, “Others, not elect, may be called by the ministry of the word, and the Spirit may work in them in some of the same ways He works in the elect. However, they never truly come to Christ and therefore **cannot** be saved.”

IF the statement above means that only those elect for salvation can be saved, I wholeheartedly agree.

IF the statement above means that there is a group of people that “cannot be saved,” as some have argued, I would have to object. If there is a group of people that “cannot be saved,” it means that God “cannot save them,” for He is the only one who saves. In Matthew 19:25-26, the disciples ask Jesus “Who then, **can** be saved?” Jesus replies, “With man this is impossible, but with God **all things are possible**.” I do not see how one could affirm that there is a group of people that God “cannot save” without denying Christ’s meaning in Matthew 19:26.

Furthermore, if 10.4 of the Westminster Confession means that there is a group of people that “cannot be saved” and I am to subscribe to chapter 35 of the same confession, it appears to me that I must affirm that God desires the “impossible.”

Chapter 35 reads, “God in infinite and perfect love, having provided in the covenant of grace, through the mediation and sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ, a way of life and salvation, sufficient for and adapted to the **whole lost race of man**, doth freely offer this salvation to **all men** in the gospel. In the gospel God declares his love for the world and his **desire that all men should be saved**; reveals fully and clearly the only way of salvation; promises eternal life to all who truly repent and believe in Christ; invites and **commands all to embrace the offered mercy**; and by his Spirit accompanying the word pleads with men to accept his gracious invitation” (35.1-2). I affirm chapter 35 of the Confession and therefore must object to a reading of Chapter 10.4 that would necessitate postulating a group of people that God cannot save.

3. Chapter 21.3 states, “In order for prayer to be accepted it must be made... if vocal, in a known tongue.” I believe that worshipers may pray vocally in unknown tongues if someone with the gift of translation of tongues is present and willing to offer translation.
4. Chapter 22 appears to be misguided to me. I do not understand how the concept of “Lawful Oaths and Vows” can be justified biblically in light of Matt. 5:33-37 and James 5:12, “But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your ‘yes’ be yes and your ‘no’ be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.” (ESV)
5. Chapter 29.8 states: “Therefore, just as the ignorant and ungodly are not fit to enjoy communion with Christ, neither are they worthy to come to the Lord’s table, and, as long as they remain ignorant and ungodly, they cannot and must not be allowed to partake of the holy mystery of communion without committing a great sin against Christ.” This is a confusing statement and perhaps I do not understand it. However if “unworthiness” consists of “ignorance and ungodliness,” it appears that Jesus violated the Westminster Confession of Faith on the night he instituted the Sacrament. He commanded his disciples to eat and drink, yet that night they would all fail him. Peter would deny him and be “sifted by Satan.” Judas (who appears to have been present) would betray him. They certainly may have drunk “judgment on themselves,” but they were still told to drink. Furthermore, if the Sacrament is indeed a mystery, doesn’t that necessitate “ignorance” by definition? I certainly believe that Paul’s instructions to the church in 1 Corinthians 11 should be followed with care; however I don’t believe they contradict the actions of Jesus on the night he inaugurated the Sacrament.

These are the objections to The Westminster Confession of Faith that I am aware of at this time. I believe that what I’ve communicated in sermons and other places is in compliance with and indeed even mandated by my subscription to the system of doctrine contained in the Westminster Confession as it is presented in the EPC handbook. Indeed, the Westminster Confession, as we have received it, appears to mandate more than I have

preached or am comfortable in preaching. Chapters 34 and 35 were added at the turn of the century. Chapter 35 appears to at least question the doctrine of limited atonement.

Chapter 10.1 states, “God effectually calls all those and only those whom he has predestined to life.” That means if God calls a person, they will be saved (Romans 8:30). Chapter 35.2 states, “(God) invites and commands all to embrace the offered mercy.” The “all” in chapter 35 is defined as “the whole lost race of man (35.1).” If God effectually calls, and indeed “commands all to embrace the offered mercy,” then the confession as received certainly implies that “all” will “embrace the offered mercy.” I would suggest that the WCF, as received by the EPC, has internal inconsistencies that make an entirely “subscriptionist” position impossible. If any in the Presbytery renounce a doctrine of “limited atonement” or “limited call,” as Chapter 35 seems to require, and do not renounce the doctrine of “effectual calling” as Chapter 10 clearly requires, they have embraced a position that goes beyond anything I have preached.

It is my understanding that I am being questioned regarding my exceptions to the WCF. However, I also realize that some have taken issue with other things that I have said or written; therefore, I will include some additional material: first a short summary of things that I’ve said and haven’t said, and secondly a longer summary of exegetical, theological and pastoral concerns. If the additional material is problematic for some, I hope the Presbytery will remember that this material is NOT the substance of my exceptions to the WCF.

Thank You Very Much,
Peter Hiatt
9-25-07

Date: October 16, 2007

To: Teaching Elder Peter Hiatt, Senior Pastor, Lookout Mountain Community Church

From: Ministerial Committee, Presbytery of the West, E.P.C.

Ref: Renunciation of your WCF exceptions

Dear Peter,

Thank you for your participation last weekend in the exceptions process at Presbytery. Your manner and passion were as expected: a fellow presbyter participating with his brothers and sisters in a difficult process with love and respect.

As you know, by majority vote the Presbytery did not allow two of your exceptions to the WCF. Our responsibility now is to make as specific as possible the objections of the Presbytery of the West to your exceptions. We are hopeful this will lead to your reconsideration of your exceptions. We cannot poll every presbyter to discuss the nuances of their opposition, but will do our best to represent them, as is our charge.

I. The first exception not allowed by the Presbytery of the West is number 1 on your list. You wrote:

*Chapter 3.7 states, "...it **pleased** God not to call the rest of mankind and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin..." I am unclear as to who "the rest of mankind" are, but whoever they are, Scripture states that "he (the Lord) does not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men" (Lam. 3:33). Ezekiel 18:23, "Have I any **pleasure** in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?" Chapter 35.2 of our confession states that God desires "that all men should be saved." I realize that there are great mysteries here and that the English language has changed since the seventeenth century, but it seems misguided to use the word "pleased" in a confessional document in reference to God's internal state regarding the act of damning the wicked.*

The whole of Chapter 3.7 says

According to the hidden purpose of his own will, by which he offers or withholds mercy at his pleasure, and for the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, it pleased God not to call the rest of mankind and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin to the praise of his glorious justice.

The intent of this paragraph is to enlarge/magnify the will of God to include its mystery and its inscrutability. This you acknowledge in your exception. It seems, though, that you cannot live with the tensions inherent in agreeing that God is sovereign in his power to save and to not save. You cite "God's internal state" as a reason to dismiss "pleasure" as a word describing his conduct of his will because its "17th century meaning" doesn't translate well.

Webster's Dictionary defines **please** as: "to give pleasure or satisfaction," but also as, "to be the appropriate will of," and, "a clear desire or inclination" (e.g. "it pleases His Majesty to do..."). While we agree that God gets no glee or joy from the suffering of anyone, it pleases him (it is his appropriate will and desire) when his justice and holiness are correctly demonstrated. This could be seen like a courtroom judge who is pleased that a guilty criminal fairly receives a "guilty" verdict and is given the ensuing just punishment, while still drawing no joy that the crime was committed, or that the subsequent punishment of the guilty is required.

WCF 3.7 includes two underlying theological truths:

- That some of mankind will not experience God's mercy and be ordained to dishonor and wrath, and
- That it is suitable and is God's desire in his sovereign will that this be so.

For the Presbytery, the word "pleasure," in addition to the texts you have cited, was also used in the WCF 3.7 to substantiate this specific confession. The texts cited in our edition of the WCF under 3.7 supporting the confession are Matthew 11:25-26 and 1 Peter 2:8. Jesus uses "pleasure" to describe God's interior counsel in determining to show his will to unsophisticated and ordinary people while not doing this for the learned and "know-it-alls" who had received most of his miracles and teaching, without believing and following him. The WCF divines and Peter the Apostle concur that mercy and grace are not an obligation God has -- they are gifts. In his justice he rightly withholds it from whomever he chooses. This glorifies and exalts him.

This is the intent of 3.7. His glory manifest throughout his creation is the hope of his creation. It does not cause God an internal discomfort to withhold grace forever from those who scorn it.

Therefore, your brothers and sisters of the Presbytery ask that you renounce your exception to WCF 3.7

AND

affirm WCF 3.7 in its entirety, confirming that it is appropriately God's will and choice as Creator and King Eternal that he not call some of mankind and that he ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin to the praise of his glorious justice.

II. Your second WCF exception was disallowed by Presbytery. You wrote:

Chapter 10.4 reads, "Others, not elect, may be called by the ministry of the word and the Spirit may work in them in some of the same ways He works in the elect. However, they never truly come to Christ and therefore cannot be saved."

IF the statement above means that only those elect for salvation can be saved, I wholeheartedly agree.

IF the statement above means that there is a group of people that “cannot be saved,” as some have argued, I would have to object. If there is a group of people that “cannot be saved” it means that God “cannot save them,” for He is the only one who saves....

To cite the WCF 10.4 paragraph again, in its entirety:

Others, not elect, may be called by the ministry of the word, and the Spirit may work in them in some of the same ways he works in the elect. However, they never truly come to Christ and therefore cannot be saved. And, of course, people, not professing the Christian religion, cannot be saved in any other way at all, no matter how hard they try to live a moral life according to their own understanding or try to follow the rules of some other religion. To say they can be saved is extremely harmful and should be denounced.

At clearest reading, chapter 10.4 includes several theological truths:

- Not all people are “the elect.” There are undoubtedly two groups of people referenced - the elect and the not elect.
- Those called the “not elect” never truly come to Christ.
- Those called the “not elect” cannot be saved “in any other way at all.”
- To say that those “not elect” can be saved is extremely harmful and should be denounced.

Your first “If” statement is no doubt the correct understanding of 10.4. Only the elect will be saved. But the second “If” you postulate is true as well: the WCF states that there are some people that are not elect and they cannot be saved. The reason they cannot be saved is clear, too: “they never truly come to Christ.” This is not a limitation on God’s power to save or on his love, but an operation based on his sovereign, self-limiting choice to judge justly. While all things are possible with God, he himself has promised in Scripture to do some things and not do others, effectively choosing to limit what can or cannot happen. (For example, since God has promised never to flood the earth again, it cannot happen.) He is a God who reveals his will and his nature as volitional promises which become self-limiting because he cannot lie. The WCF system of doctrine recognizes that the Bible teaches God’s love for all mankind. It also proclaims God’s righteous, loving, volitional choice to eternally separate those “not elect” from himself, while saving the elect by grace.

Theologically, both 3.7 and 10.4 in the WCF includes God’s just ordination of some to the judgment of hell eternally. God’s wrath for those who are not elect – those who never come to Christ, who justly experience a never-ending, painful separation from him -- is a part of the reformed fabric of the WCF. Any measuring of hell to limit its duration or nature or any exegesis that someday the “not elect” will come to Christ would have been completely foreign to those who wrote the WCF and necessitates deconstructing the normal use of language.

What the Presbytery requires that you reconsider is your definition of the “elect.” Some heard something contrary to 10.4 in your desire to “meaningfully hope that God will ultimately redeem all,” which makes, ultimately, “all” the “elect.” While we share the hope that as many as possible will be elect to salvation, 10.4’s last sentence is intended for those who would surmise any means of circumventing the need to respond to the grace and mercy through Christ extended to all who draw breath, while they draw breath. As such, we believe Presbytery considers your view “extremely harmful and (it) should be denounced.”

Therefore, your brothers and sisters of the Presbytery ask that you renounce your exception to WCF 10.4

AND

affirm WCF 10.4 in its entirety, acknowledging that there are some people who are or will be “not elect,” and who will never truly come to Christ and so cannot be saved.

Thank you, brother, for your consideration and prayer over these areas of theological difference. Please respond to us by email or in writing with your decision by November 1, 2007. We admire your effort toward scholarship, and see that it ignites your devotion. We do not think that if you humbly changed your mind on these WCF sections, your zeal for Christ would be diminished in the least. Our hope is that indeed this will be your decision for we desire to affirm and endorse your ministry publicly and privately. We look forward to God’s work at Lookout Mountain Community Church, believing that the church’s best days are ahead of her. We would love to see you in good standing in the E.P.C., hopefully serving as Lookout’s Senior Pastor or in some other key role in the EPC. May Jesus lead us in the process and journey together.

With our love and prayers,

The Ministerial Committee, for the Presbytery of the West, EPC

Ed Davis, TE, Christ Fellowship Church
Brad Strait, TE, South Fellowship Church

Dear Brad and Ed,

In response to your letter, dated October 16, 2007, I would first like to reiterate: “I still ‘sincerely receive and adopt the Westminster Confession of Faith... as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures.’ Furthermore, I do not ‘find myself out of accord with any of the *Essentials of the Faith*.’ I’m also unable to articulate a change in my views since the ‘assumption of my ordination vows.’” I understand that some of the “powers that be” have stated that these proceedings are in order. However, as I read our Book of Government, I fail to see where the Ministerial Committee is given the authority to question the “exceptions” of fellow Presbyters and make recommendations to the Presbytery as to disapproving those “exceptions” when the Presbyter being questioned holds equal standing and has not stated a change in views since ordination. We do need a process to question the theology of fellow Presbyters and it appears to me that we have a good one clearly outlined in the Book of Discipline. I realize that we may be beyond that point and that you may be acting in good faith. I also realize that I have been deficient in my understanding of the system, however, for future reference: I do believe that the process has been “unprecedented” and “confusing” because we have not followed our system of government. Nonetheless, with the help of a friend here at LMCC, I will attempt a response.

You state in your letter, “It seems, though, that you cannot live with the tensions inherent in agreeing that God is sovereign in his power to save and to not save. You cite ‘God’s internal state’ as a reason to dismiss ‘pleasure’ as a word describing his conduct of his will because its ‘17th century meaning’ doesn’t translate well.”

I believe you are correct in pointing to a tension in the Scriptures concerning God’s will to save and to not save. Can I live with the tension inherent in the Scripture? Yes, I can. When I see Scripture speaking to multiple sides of an issue, it lets me know that either God has chosen to not make a matter perfectly clear, or we have not yet come to a place where we understand what God has revealed. It seems that the easy way out is to simply choose one side of an issue, gather the requisite verses to defend that stand, and then live comfortably on that side of the issue. Perhaps a better tact is to see these areas of tension as an invitation to further explore the nature of God and His purposes. My exception to 3.7 is based on my belief that we have not come to a place where we understand God’s revelation completely in this matter and we must continue to wrestle with it. My statements about the word “please” reflect not only the tension in the Scripture but also my attempts to wrestle with it.

I don’t have a good understanding of old English definitions of the word “please.” I do have access to biblical definitions. The Old Testament *chaphets* is used in Ezekiel 18:23 translated “to delight in, take pleasure in” (Strongs). In Greek, the verb *eudokeo* means “be well pleased, regard favourably, take delight in.” The noun *eudokia* means “good will, good pleasure, favour, wish, desire.” (DNTT) When the Bible writers use the word ‘please,’ they certainly seem to be describing an emotional condition internal to God. To divorce God’s judgments from God’s emotions does not seem congruent with scripture. You make the statement, “It does not cause God an internal discomfort to withhold grace

forever from those who scorn it.” According to our Reformed Theology, persons can only scorn grace forever because it has already been withheld. Even if this were not the case, it seems presumptuous to make doctrinal assertions about God’s feelings while damning the wicked, especially when it appears to contradict Scripture. This is why I presented the Scripture from Ezekiel 18:23 and statements from Chapter 35 of the WCF (written in modern English, not old English). They indicate that God is neither cold nor heartless regarding the lost.

When looking at the list of proof texts to support 3.7, it becomes obvious that only those verses (two of them) that support such a view are presented. While these verses are true, they are not the sum total of the Scriptures relevant to this subject and do not necessitate a confession of God’s pleasure in damning people. One of those verses, Matt. 11:25 indicates that God takes pleasure in hiding things from the wise and revealing them to babes, but this is not the same as saying that God takes pleasure in withholding grace forever. Because 1 Peter 2:8 tells us that some are destined to disobedience, it does not follow that God takes pleasure in damning people to torment without end. Whatever the case regarding these texts, my objection is based on my comfort with the “tension” and my discomfort with resolving “tension,” that may best be left a mystery.

In regard to my exception to WCF 10.4 you say, “Any measuring of hell to limit its duration or nature or any exegesis that someday the ‘not elect’ will come to Christ would have been completely foreign to those who wrote the WCF and necessitates deconstructing the normal use of language.” Well, I’m not convinced of this regarding the nature of hell (I’ve read that some of the Westminster Divines held to the hypothetical universalism of Amyraldian Calvinism and clearly those that penned Chapter 35 in 1910 were asking similar questions to mine). And like I’ve said, I believe that only the elect unto salvation can be saved. But why does it matter whether or not the authors of the WCF would consider something foreign? One could argue that it was a completely foreign concept to those who wrote the WCF that the Pope could be a follower of Christ. Just as the author’s declaration of the Pope as the Antichrist was a reaction to the structure of the Catholic Church of their day, it is easy to see that their view of eternity was, in part, a reaction to the Catholic Church’s teachings on purgatory, indulgences, and pilgrimages. When 10.4 says, “To say they can be saved is extremely harmful and should be denounced,” I suspect that the authors are speaking to those that taught that salvation could be earned through the works of the Catholic Church or through some other religious system.

I want to make it clear that I wholeheartedly agree that salvation is only through Christ and cannot be earned in any manner. I also believe that only the elect unto salvation can be saved. However, statements regarding the “not elect” still require some wrestling for me. As yet, they do not nullify Christ’s very clear statement that although impossible for men, “with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26). Remember that he said this in answer to the question, “Who then can be saved?”

I do not believe that God has made a “self-limiting promise” to not save all that have died in Adam. Indeed in 1 Cor. 15:22 and Romans 5:15-18, God seems to promise just the

opposite. I certainly agree with you that there appears to be a tension between these verses and other verses in Paul's very same letter regarding "the elect." I would like us to "live with that tension." I do not believe that because someone is a "child of wrath" or "vessel of wrath" (Romans 9:22) or indeed elected to wrath, that this person is *necessarily* "not elect" to salvation. Indeed, we "were all children of wrath like the rest of mankind" (Eph.2:3), yet we are elect in Christ Jesus. I am unable to find the term "not elect" in any of the Bibles I have access to. The term certainly is implied, but begs a question: "Not elect to what?" In reference to "the elect," scripture seems to demand a great deal of mystery. In Romans 11:7 and 28-30, Paul clearly states that there are some who are "enemies of God [and apparently not elect in v.7]...But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers." Clearly we need to ask, "Elect for what? And Elect in what?" Paul ends that chapter of Romans by stating, "How unsearchable his judgments and inscrutable his ways... for from him and to him and through him are all things. To him be glory forever, Amen." (11:33, 36). These verses teach me that definitions of "the elect" belong to him. That He "elects" has clearly been revealed. You ask that I reconsider my "definition of the 'elect.'" I was not aware that I had defined "the elect." I think I have questioned other's definitions of "the elect." Whatever the case, it does seem clear that any human definitions of "the elect" should be suspect and do not necessitate a "self-limiting promise" by God regarding His inability to save. Tension? Yes. Wrestling? Yes. Limiting the power of the cross? No.

Scripture attests to realities that do not fit neatly into our common sense notions of justice or our perceptions of space and time. I seek to wrestle with the sum total of the Scriptures related to this subject and guard biblical mysteries. I therefore cannot affirm 10.4 if it is interpreted as stating that there is a group of people that God "cannot save." To say that there is a group of people that God cannot save (which I am not convinced the authors of the WCF intended to say, but you seem to be saying), is to go beyond the tension in Scripture and directly against the words of Christ in Matthew 19:26.

Let us remember that the WCF has been extensively modified through the years as our understanding of God's revelation has improved. It took many years of wrestling for church leaders to no longer consider the Pope the Antichrist. However, because of that wrestling we realized that the Pope is probably not the Antichrist, and thus the statement that the Pope is the Antichrist was removed from the WCF.

Wrestling is hard work spanning many years on any given subject. It took 200 years of tension and work, from Wycliffe & Huss to Luther & Calvin, for a clear theology of salvation by grace to be delineated. What the church continues to need are theologians who wrestle with the tensions in the Scriptures in order to understand more of the God who is. What the Presbytery seems to be asking me to do is to cease wrestling with these mysteries because they are conclusively addressed in the WCF. I don't believe the WCF itself allows me to do this (WCF 1.8).

Someone sent me this quote by N.T. Wright: "Some people talk as if what God REALLY wanted to say is contained in the Westminster Confession of Faith, and it's just too bad that it got all jumbled up in the Bible." I hope we aren't those people. I have believed that

the EPC is not those people. I love the system (even systems) of theology contained in the WCF. They help me think about Scripture, but I cannot allow the WCF to replace Scripture. Neither Jesus nor the WCF will let me.

Sincerely,
Peter Hiatt