

**The 1689 Confession of Faith; Chapter 2 – “Of God and the Holy Trinity”,
Message # 30 – “Christ’s Absolute and Ordinate Power”, Presented in the Adult Sunday
School Class, by Pastor Paul Rendall on March 26th, 2017.**

Chapter 2 – Of God and the Holy Trinity, Paragraph 1 -

The Lord our God is but (a)one only living and true God; whose (b)subsistence is in and of Himself, (c)infinite in being and perfection; whose essence cannot be comprehended by any but Himself; (d)a most pure spirit, (e) invisible, without body, parts, or passions, who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; who is (f)immutable, (g)immense, (h)eternal, incomprehensible, (i)almighty, every way infinite, (k)most holy, most wise, most free, most absolute; (l)working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will, (m)for his own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; (n)the rewarder of them that diligently seek him, and withal most just (o)and terrible in his judgments, (p)hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the (q)guilty.

a 1st Corinthians 8: 4 and 6; Deuteronomy 6: 4; b Jeremiah 10: 10; Isa 48: 12; c Exodus 3: 14; d John 4: 24; e 1st Timothy 1: 17; Deut. 4: 15-16; f Malachi 3:6; g 1st Kings 8: 27; Jeremiah 23: 23; h Psalm 90: 2; j Genesis 17: 1; k Isa 6: 3; l Psalm 115: 3; Isa 46: 10; m Pro 16: 4; Rom 11: 36; n Exodus 34: 6-7; Hebrews 11:6; o Nehemiah 9: 32-33; p Psalm 5: 5-6; q Exodus 34:7; Nahum 1: 2-3

Last Sunday a question arose in connection with God’s absolute power; whether God could choose to will to sin, and I said that all sin is the antithesis of God’s being and as such, God cannot lie, or commit any sin. I could have quoted Numbers 23: 19 – “God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent.” Yesterday I went to Greg Nichol’s new Systematic Theology (Lectures in Systematic Theology, the Doctrine of God) to look at his section on God’s attribute of power, and found this:

“Reformed Theologians often call God’s infinite potential his “absolute” power. Charnock prudently says that his ordinate power falls within its scope. To express this connection I reason from God’s concrete power to his abstract potential that undergirds it: ‘God can do anything and everything he will to do, merely by willing it, since nothing can restrain him and nothing is too hard for him’ “Charnock also wisely notes that God has, not two distinct powers of Absolute and Ordinate power, but one. “Although Bavinck, Berkhof, and Charnock discretely distinguish absolute from ordinate power, we must use caution. Some use the term absolute to promote the error of total omnipotence. Berkhof and Hodge warn about this misuse of the term:

Berkhof says: “Reformed theology rejects this distinction in the sense in which it was understood by the Scholastics, who claimed that God by virtue of his absolute power could effect contradictions, and could even sin and annihilate himself.”

Hodge says: By absolute power, as understood by the schoolmen and some of the later philosophers, is meant power free from all the restraints of reason and morality.” “According to this doctrine, contradictions, absurdities, and immoralities, are all within the scope of the divine power.” “Nay, it is said that God can annihilate Himself.”

Greg Nichols says: Further, Hodge defines the good sense of the term “Absolute” power differently from Berkhof, Bavinck, and Charnock.” “He uses the term, absolute, to refer to the supernatural instrumentality of omnipotence: He says: “A distinction is commonly made between the *potentia absoluta* and the *potentia ordinata* of God.” “By the latter (ordinate) is meant the efficiency of God, as exercised uniformly in the ordered operation of second causes; by the former (absolute), His efficiency, as exercised without the intervention of second causes.” “Creation, miracles, immediate revelation, inspiration, and regeneration, are to be referred to the *potentia absoluta* of God; all His works of providence to His *potentia ordinata*.” “This distinction is important, as it draws the line between the natural and supernatural.”

He further says: “Although Hodge admirably defends God’s supernatural power, he does not mean by “absolute” power what Berkhof, Bavinck, and Charnock mean.” “Thus, men speak of “absolute power” in three different senses.” “For false teachers, “absolute” power means unprincipled power, divorced from virtue and wisdom.” “For Berkhof, Bavinck, and Charnock, “absolute” power means infinite potentiality.” “For Hodge, “absolute” power means supernatural power, exercised without means.” “I mention this with some reluctance, desiring only to dispel any confusion that you assigned reading caused.”

So, when I have spoken to you about God's Absolute Power, I meant infinite potentiality, not anything related to unprincipled power, divorced from virtue and wisdom.

1. It was our Lord Jesus who showed us the Highest and Finest example of Prayer in Relation to the Power and Purpose of God, that He would become our Savior by means of His death.

We have been discussing the Lord's power over the last few Sundays; discussing it in relation to God's being absolute in His power. We have looked at the subject of God's being absolute in His purposes and absolute in His ability to answer the prayers of His people. Two Sundays ago we looked at the Lord's Prayer; that to Him belongs the kingdom, the glory, and the power forever. Today I would you to think about Christ's ordinate power in accomplishing His Father's purpose; to go to the cross and to die in the place of all of His elect people. Because He was God made manifest in the flesh, He had the power to lay down His life, and power to take it up again. This He received from His Father. We see here that the Lord Jesus was in perfect subjection to the will of His Father in laying down His life, and He was perfectly fulfilling the purpose of the Father in His rising again from the dead.

John 10: 17 and 18 – “Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again.” “No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself.” “I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again.” “This command I have received from My Father.”

Mark 14: 32-38 – “Then they came to a place which was named Gethsemane; and He said to His disciples, ‘Sit here while I pray.’ “And He took Peter, James, and John with Him, and He began to be troubled and deeply distressed.” “Then He said to them, ‘My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death.’ “Stay here and watch.” “He went a little farther, and fell on the ground, and prayed that if it were possible, the hour might pass from Him.” “And He said, ‘Abba, Father, all things are possible for You.’ “Take this cup away from Me; nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will.” “Then He came and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, ‘Simon, are you sleeping?’ “Could you not watch one hour?” “Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation.” “The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

The Lord Jesus is praying, calling upon the Father, asserting the truth that since all things are possible for Him, (God's Absolute Power) that He would ask that the cup of sufferings might pass from Him, that He might not have to undergo it. But He knows the Father's purpose, and knew also that it was His Father's plan for Him to go to the cross, and so He prays – “Not My will, but what You will,” be done. This is God's ordinate power being demonstrated. The prayer of the Lord Jesus is contrasted with the prayerlessness of the disciples; their sleeping in the time when they should have watched and prayed. The Lesson being, that it takes the power of Christ to watch and pray so that we will not enter into temptation.

Matthew 26: 47-56 – “And while He was still speaking, behold Judas, one of the twelve, with a great multitude with swords and clubs, came from the chief priests and elders of the people.” “Now His betrayer had given them a sign, saying, ‘Whomever I kiss, He is the One; seize Him.’ “Immediately he went up to Jesus and said, ‘Greetings, Rabbi!’ and kissed Him.” “And suddenly, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword, struck the servant of the high priest, and cut off his ear.” “But Jesus said to him, ‘Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.’ “Or do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels?” “How then could the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen thus?”

Jesus acquiesces in the will of the Father, knowing now that the work of redemption is before Him. Judas comes with a group of the temple guards, to betray our Lord. He does not run from them, and since Peter knew that his Master would be taken away a prisoner and probably be sentenced to death, he decides to draw his sword and strikes off the high priest's servant's ear. But Jesus answers him with this question: “Do you not think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than

twelve legions of angels?” This is absolute power. But the statement, “How then could the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen thus?” This is ordinate power.

2. More examples of Christ’s Ordinate Power:

Luke 22: 47-53 – “And while He was still speaking, behold a multitude; and he who was called Judas one of the twelve, went before them and drew near to Jesus to kiss Him.” “But Jesus said to him, Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?” “When those around Him saw what was going to happen, they said to Him, Lord, shall we strike with the sword?” “And one of them struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his right ear.” “But Jesus answered and said, ‘Permit even this.’ “And He touched his ear and healed him.” “Then Jesus said to the chief priests, captains of the temple, and the elders who had come to Him, “Have you come out, as against a robber, with swords and clubs?” “When I was with you daily in the temple, you did not try to seize Me.” “But this is yours and the power of darkness.”

John 18: 3-9 – “Then Judas, having received a detachment of troops, and officers from the chief priests and Pharisees, came there with lanterns, torches, and weapons.” “Jesus therefore, knowing all things that would come upon Him, went forward and said to them, ‘Whom are you seeking?’ “They answered Him, ‘Jesus of Nazareth.’ “Jesus said to them, ‘I am He.’ “And Judas who betrayed Him, also stood with them.” “Then – when He said to them, ‘I am He,’ – they drew back and fell to the ground.”

John 19: 7-11 – “The Jews answer Pilate, ‘We have a law, and according to our law He ought to die, because he made Himself the Son of God.’ “Therefore, when Pilate heard that saying, he was the more afraid, and went again into the Praetorium, and said to Jesus, ‘Where are You from?’ “But Jesus gave him no answer.” “Then Pilate said to Him, ‘Are You not speaking to me?’ “Do You not know that I have power to crucify You, and power to release You?’ “Jesus answered, ‘You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above.’ “Therefore the one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin.”

Stephen Charnock says again (Vol. 2, Page 107): “This power is of a distinct conception from the wisdom and will of God. They are not really distinct, but according to our conceptions. We cannot discourse of divine things without observing some proportion of them with human, ascribing unto God the perfections, sifted from the imperfections of our nature. In us there are three orders, of understanding, will, and power; and accordingly three acts, counsel, resolution, and execution ; which, though they are distinct in us, are not really distinct in God. In our conceptions, the apprehension of a thing belongs to the understanding of God; determination, to the will of God ; direction, to the wisdom of God ; execution, to the power of God. The knowledge of God regards a thing as possible, and as it may be done; the wisdom of God regards a thing as fit and convenient to be done ; the will of God resolves that it shall be done; the power of God is the application of his will to effect what it hath resolved.

Wisdom is a fixing the being of things, the measures and perfections of their several beings; power is a conferring those perfections and beings upon them. His power is his ability to act, and his wisdom is the director of his action. His will orders, his wisdom guides, and his power effects. His will as the spring, and his power as the worker, are expressed, Ps. cxv. 8, ‘He hath done whatsoever he pleased.’ “He commanded, and they were created,’ Ps. cxlviii. 5. And all three expressed Eph. i. 11, ‘Who works all things according to the counsel of his own will.’ So that the power of God is a perfection (as it were) subordinate to his understanding and will, to execute the results of his wisdom and the orders of his will ; to his wisdom, as directing, because he works skillfully; to his will, as moving and applying, because he works voluntarily and freely.

The exercise of his power depends upon his will. His will is the supreme cause of everything that stands up in time, and all things receive a being as he wills them. His power is but will perpetually working, and diffusing itself in the season His will hath fixed from eternity. It is His eternal will, in perpetual and successive springs and streams in the creatures ; it is nothing else but the constant efficacy of His omnipotent will. This must be understood of his ordinate power. But his absolute power is larger than his resolving will; for though the Scripture tells us he hath done whatsoever he will, yet it tells us not that he hath done whatsoever he could. He can do things that he will never do.

Again, his power is distinguished from his will in regard of the exercise of it, which is after the act of his will. His will was conversant about objects when his power was not exercised about them. Creatures were the objects of his will from eternity, but they were not from eternity the effects of his power. His purpose to create was from eternity, but the execution of his purpose was in time. Now, this execution of his will we call his ordinate power. His wisdom and his will are supposed antecedent to his power, as the counsel and resolve, as the cause precedes the performance of the purpose, as the effect. Some* distinguish his power from his understanding and will, in regard that his understanding and will are larger than his absolute power; for God understands sins, and wills to permit them, but he cannot himself do any evil or unjust action, nor have a power of doing it. But this is not to distinguish that divine power, but impotence, for to be unable to do evil is the perfection of power, and to be able to do things unjust and evil is a weakness, imperfection, and inability. Man indeed wills many things that he is not able to perform, and understands many things that he is not able to effect; he understands much of the creatures, something of sun, moon, and stars ; he can conceive many suns, many moons, yet is not able to create the least atom. But there is nothing that belongs to power but God understands and is able to effect. To sum this up, the will of God is the root of all, the wisdom of God is the copy of all, and the power of God is the framer of all.”

3. Let us remember that God is glorious in power.

Ephesians 3: 20 – “Now to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end.” “Amen.”

Exodus 15: 1-7 – Then Moses and the children of Israel sang this song to the LORD, and spoke, saying: "I will sing to the LORD, For He has triumphed gloriously! The horse and its rider He has thrown into the sea! The LORD is my strength and song, And He has become my salvation; He is my God, and I will praise Him; My father's God, and I will exalt Him. The LORD is a man of war; The LORD is His name. Pharaoh's chariots and his army He has cast into the sea; His chosen captains also are drowned in the Red Sea. The depths have covered them; They sank to the bottom like a stone. "Your right hand, O LORD, has become glorious in power; Your right hand, O LORD, has dashed the enemy in pieces. And in the greatness of Your excellence You have overthrown those who rose against You; You sent forth Your wrath; It consumed them like stubble. And with the blast of Your nostrils The waters were gathered together; The floods stood upright like a heap; The depths congealed in the heart of the sea. The enemy said, 'I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil; My desire shall be satisfied on them. I will draw my sword, My hand shall destroy them.' You blew with Your wind, The sea covered them; They sank like lead in the mighty waters. "Who is like You, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like You, glorious in holiness, Fearful in praises, doing wonders? You stretched out Your right hand; The earth swallowed them.”