

MEET ME IN THE MIDDLE: HERMAN WITSIUS AND THE ENGLISH DISSENTERS

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Introduction

CONFLICT IS inevitable whenever there is more than one sinner. It has been rightly said that just as you cannot rub flint and iron together without getting a spark, so you cannot put two sinners together without having sparks. Indeed, place a multitude of sinners in one room and fireworks are sure to go off.

Redeemed sinners are not immune to discord as experience has and continues to teach painfully. One past lesson is the controversy, which erupted in the 1690s, between the Congregationalists and Presbyterians in and about London, England.

Union between the two groups had made substantial progress in 1691 with the formation of the *Happy Union* but sadly sparks were already flying, which soon gave way to flames of fire. Despite numerous attempts at reconciliation, the controversy raged on, further alienating the two sides.

No doubt following the principles of Matthew 18, the two parties decided to ask for outside help. Needing someone respected by all that could serve as an impartial judge, the London ministers turned to the Dutch theologian Herman Witsius. Witsius humbly accepted the invitation, and produced a response in 1696 in the form of a book.¹ Originally written in Latin, it was translated into English by the Scottish minister Thomas Bell and published in 1807 under the title: *Conciliatory, or Irenical Animadversions on the Controversies Agitated in Britain, under the unhappy names of Antinomians and Neonomians*.

This paper will examine Herman Witsius' role in this English Non-Conformist debate. In so doing, we will first provide an historical overview. Second, on the basis of his *Conciliatory Animadversions*, summarize his analysis and judgment of the controversy. Third, determine what impact, if any, Witsius' response produced.

¹ See Donald Fraser, "Memoir of Witsius" prefaced to Herman Witsius, *Sacred Dissertations, on what is commonly called the Apostles' Creed* (trans. Donald Fraser, 1823; repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1993), 1:xx.

1. Historical Overview

1.1. General Overview

Although a certain degree of co-operation between English Independents and Presbyterians had existed prior to the final decade of the seventeenth century, such as a joint lecture series at Pinner's Hall, it didn't begin in earnest until 1689. The Toleration Act of 1689 provided the peace while the failure of the Comprehension Bill of 1689 provided the incentive on the part of the Presbyterians for greater union. The closing of one door led to the opening of another.

In the city of London, union involved the establishment of a common fund to help needy country churches in July of 1690 and the *Happy Union*, early the following year. The latter united the ministers on the basis of an agreed upon doctrinal document, entitled *Heads of Agreement* and established regular meetings for consultation. All Presbyterian and Congregational ministers in London signed the *Heads of Agreement* except three: Thomas Cole, Nathaniel Mather, and Richard Taylor.²

Trouble, however, was already brewing due to the activities of Richard Davis and the reprinting of the sermons of Tobias Crisp in 1690. A strict Congregationalist, Davis stirred the pot with his non-Presbyterian methods, and his preaching, being accused of Antinomianism. Even fellow Congregationalists were offended, leading the opposition against him.³ To vindicate himself Davis met with the full assembly of the United Ministers of London in May 1692. Although he was accused of various errors, he was neither disciplined nor exonerated. Subsequently, a committee was sent to Davis' hometown to investigate complaints against him. But this too did nothing to hinder his ministry.

Coinciding with the Davis affair was the reprinting of Tobias Crisp's sermons, entitled *Christ Alone Exalted*, by his son Samuel. Having been controversial when they were first published for espousing Antinomian doctrines,⁴ this new edition was no different. If anything this reprint elevated the level of controversy as the preface contained a rebuttal of Richard Baxter's view on imputation. Polemical responses were not slow in coming, beginning with Baxter.

In the words of J. I. Packer, Antinomianism was Baxter's lifelong bogey.⁵ He abhorred this error and believed that he was called by God to deliver the Reformed world from it.⁶ For a time he had thought that his earlier efforts had successfully kept it in check.⁷ But the renewed interest in Crisp, whom he referred to at one point as Jezebel, among Non-

² Daniel Williams, *The Answer to the Report*, (London: 1698), 2.

³ Michael Watts, *The Dissenters: From the Reformation to the French Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 292-293.

⁴ Benjamin Brook, *The Lives of the Puritans* (1813; repr., Soli Deo Gloria: Morgan, PA, 1996), 2:474.

⁵ J. I. Packer, *The Redemption & Restoration of Man in the Thought of Richard Baxter* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2003), 351.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 263.

⁷ Hans Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn: Richard Baxter's Doctrine of Justification in Its Seventeenth-Century Context of Controversy* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2004), 61.

Conformists caused him to go on the offensive once more.⁸ In a lecture on January 28th, 1690 at Pinner's Hall, and in his book *Scripture Gospel defended*, Baxter lashed out at Crisp's views.

Isaac Chauncey insultingly suggests that the air may have cleared substantially with Baxter's death the following year if it had not been for Daniel Williams taking up the mantle.⁹ Like Baxter, Williams was deeply concerned by Antinomian doctrines, which he believed were spreading via Davis and Crisp's book. So shortly after the United Ministers meeting with Davis in May 1692, Williams published his book detailing and refuting the errors of Tobias Crisp, entitled *Gospel-Truth Stated and Vindicated*.¹⁰ Sixteen Presbyterian ministers endorsed the first edition, while the second in September 1692 contained forty-nine signatures.

Many Independent ministers were displeased with Williams. Six of them subscribed to a paper objecting to his book, submitting it to the *Happy Union*.¹¹ In the fall of 1692 Isaac Chauncey, who would become Williams' chief opponent, declared at a United Ministers meeting that he would be leaving because the Union had refused to address the paper. Williams records that it had been neglected for various reasons, including the fact that three of the six signatories were not members of the Union.¹² Notwithstanding, the Union appointed a committee to address the paper, which along with the objectors resolved the matter, by subscribing to *An Agreement in Doctrine* on December 16, 1692. Essentially, this brief document is a collection of confessional passages that address the errors of Antinomianism and Arminianism.

Unfortunately, the newfound peace was shortly lived as the debate continued, and separate meetings were established. Chauncey published a caustic reply to Williams with his three-part *Neonomianism Unmask'd* in 1692-1693, wherein he also defended Crisp.¹³ Williams responded to the first part with his *A Defense of Gospel-Truth* (1693), only to be answered by Chauncey's *A Rejoinder* (1693). In spite of the acrimonious debate further attempts at reconciliation were made but to no avail.¹⁴

Williams was ousted from Pinner's Hall in the latter half of 1694. Joined by three other Presbyterians, a rival lectureship was formed at Salters' Hall. The following year the Congregationalists decided to stop

⁸ Baxter was especially upset that twelve ministers, including some close friends, placed their names in the book, albeit only to testify to the authenticity of the previously unpublished sermons. See Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn*, 62; Peter Toon, *The Emergence of Hyper-Calvinism in English Nonconformity, 1689-1765* (London: The Olive Tree, 1967), 50.

⁹ Isaac Chauncey, *Neonomianism Unmask'd* (London: 1692), 10.

¹⁰ The full title: *Gospel-Truth Stated and Vindicated: Wherein some of Dr. Crisp's Opinions Are Considered; And The Opposite Truths Are Plainly Stated and Confirmed*.

¹¹ The six ministers were Griffith, Cole, Mather, Chauncey, Trayl, and R. Taylor.

¹² Williams, *The Answer*, 3.

¹³ The full title: *Neonomianism Unmask'd: or, the Ancient Gospel Pleaded Against the Other Called A New Law or Gospel*. Subtitle: *A Theological Debate, occasioned by a Book lately Wrote by Mr. Dan. Williams, Entitled, Gospel-Truth Stated and Vindicated: Unwarily Commended and Subscribed by some Divines*. Of Chauncey's book, Williams writes that in all his years he had never met "a Tract parallel to his [Chauncey], for abusive Language, violent Rage, and uncharitable Censures," "To the Reader," in *A Defense of Gospel-Truth* (London: 1693).

¹⁴ Williams, *The Answer*, 6-10.

co-operating with the Presbyterians in helping needy churches. So they left the Common Fund and started one of their own.¹⁵

Party spirit and heated rhetoric continued, strengthening the impasse. Outside help was clearly required if there would be any chance of salvaging the *Happy Union*, which had turned into the *Unhappy Divide*. An appeal was thus made to the celebrated Herman Witsius.

1.2. Herman Witsius

Born on February 12, 1636, Herman Witsius possessed a number of remarkable gifts, which he put to use in both the pastorate and the academy. The first 18 years of his ministerial career were spent in several pastorates, and from 1675 to his retirement in 1707, he served as professor of theology at Franeker (1675-1680), at Utrecht (1680-1698), and then at Leiden (1698-1707). After nearly fifty-two years of ministry, he went to be with the Lord on October 22, 1708.¹⁶

Having published the first edition of his *magnum opus*, *De Oeconomia Foederum Dei cum Hominibus*, in 1677, Witsius was a reputable theologian by the time he arrived in London in 1685. He went to England to represent the Dutch government at the coronation of James II and to serve as chaplain to the Netherlands Embassy in London.¹⁷ It seems he made the most of his four-month stay as he met with the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Bishop of London and a number of Conformist and Non-Conformist divines. Witsius was impressed with his English brethren in the Lord, finding “their company at once agreeable and highly instructive.”¹⁸ This visit set the stage for the English Non-Conformists to petition the Dutchman to mediate their controversy in the following decade.¹⁹

In many ways, Witsius was an ideal candidate for the job of conciliator. First, he was an outsider. The Dutch theologian could be much more objective than an English counterpart. Second, both parties respected him as evidenced by their invitation.²⁰ Third, he was an experienced conciliator, having mediated controversies throughout his career. While at his fourth pastoral charge in Leeuwarden, Witsius “played a critical role mediating disputes between Voetius and Maresius.”²¹ And he wrote his

¹⁵ Watts, *The Dissenters*, 296.

¹⁶ D. Patrick Ramsey and Joel R. Beeke, *An Analysis of Herman Witsius's The Economy of the Covenants* (Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2002), iii-viii.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, vii.

¹⁸ Fraser, *The Apostles' Creed*, 1:xix. Cf. J. van Genderen, *Herman Witsius: Bijdrage tot de Kennis der Gereformeerde Theologie* ('s-Gravenhage: Uitgeverij Guido de Bres, 1953), 72. I am indebted to Rev. Donald Codling for translating the relevant sections in van Genderen into English.

¹⁹ Witsius writes: “... you yourselves, *brethren*, would not allow me to be without a part in yours [i.e. controversy], which perhaps, are agitated with too much warmth, under the hostile standards of *Antinomians* and *Neonomians*, though both disallow the names. For some of yourselves, the books on both sides being sent me, requested my judgment, inconsiderable as it is,” *Conciliatory or Irenical Animadversions on the Controversies Agitated in Britain, under the unhappy names of Antinomians and Neonomians* (trans. Thomas Bell; Glasgow: W. Lang, 1807), 7-8.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:xx. Chauncey favorably references Witsius in his *Neonomianism Unmask'd*.

²¹ Ramsey and Beeke, *An Analysis*, vi.

Economy of the Covenants during the heated Voetian-Cocceian controversy to promote reconciliation.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, he had the gifts and graces necessary for the task. Equipped with a sharp mind, love for peace, and a congenial personality he was especially suited to tackle such a complicated, yet acrid conflict. One contemporary testimony affirmed that he was both highly learned and courteous and thus the most able to establish contact with people.²² J. I. Packer notes, “on paper, he [Witsius] was calm, judicious, systematic, clear and free from personal oddities and animosities.”²³ One biographer, though perhaps with some excess, has written:

His talents were of the first order. The force of his genius, the accuracy of his judgment, the strength of his memory, and the charms of his eloquence, were extensively known and admired ... When dangerous opinions in philosophy and divinity prevailed, and when reason was extolled to the prejudice of faith and to the overthrow of the essential doctrines of the Christian religion, he vindicated the cause of truth with pious ardour and unshaken fidelity, most happily blended with meekness and prudence. With regard to the less important differences of sentiment which took place among sound and faithful theologians, no one could exercise greater mildness and forbearance. He was an admirer of that excellent saying; ‘Unanimity in what is necessary, liberty in what is not necessary, and in all things prudence and charity.’ To heal the breaches of Zion and promote peace and concord amongst brethren, was to him a delightful office. In suavity of disposition and benignity of manners, few have equalled, and perhaps none surpassed him ... Even towards those from whom he had suffered the most virulent reproach and abuse, he discovered an exemplary spirit of meekness. It was observed, that he either made no mention of them, or repaid their calumnies by giving them those commendations, of which, on other accounts, he considered them deserving.²⁴

In spite of these advantages, there was one major drawback in calling upon Witsius. As he himself admitted, his English was poor, which made it difficult and time consuming to grasp the issues involved in the debate. Nonetheless, he diligently applied himself until he could satisfactorily and helpfully respond, which he did with the publication of his *Conciliatory Animadversions*.²⁵

This book was first printed at Utrecht in 1696, in a small octavo of 237 pages. A second printing occurred at Amsterdam in 1700, in the second volume of Witsius’ miscellanies; yet for some unknown reason

²² van Genderen, *Herman Witsius*, 71.

²³ “Introduction: On Covenant Theology” prefaced to Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man* (1736; repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1990).

²⁴ Fraser, *The Apostles’ Creed*, 1:xxv-xxvi. See also Ramsey and Beeke, *An Analysis*, xix-xxi.

²⁵ *Conciliatory Animadversions* has been admired by many such as James Hervey, Andrew Fuller, Abraham Booth, John Dick, and John Brown of Whitburn.

chapters 7 and 8 were omitted. The English translation by Thomas Bell in 1807 is of the whole work.²⁶

2. A Summary of Witsius' Conciliatory Animadversions

2.1. *Witsius' method for handling the controversy*

As E. F. Kevan has observed, the debate between the two parties often focused upon rebutting or vindicating Tobias Crisp and Richard Baxter.²⁷ Much effort was thus spent, and perhaps wasted, on exegeting these two men. Framing the discussion in this way tended to reinforce a party spirit and debating differences, which were more verbal than real.

In order to avoid these unnecessary distractions and get to the heart of the matter, Witsius wisely eschewed the personal as much as possible. Instead of focusing on what was said or unsaid by this or that man or what was well understood or misunderstood, the Dutch conciliator concentrated on:

what ought to be said, or in my judgment, at least, may be conveniently said. It is a very frequent fault with disputants, that the one complains of the sense being badly expressed, the other that it is not well understood: whence it is that the whole dispute often evanishes into a mere mistake of the subject; or which is worse, issues in the most indecent brawlings. I judged, that by all means, such a conduct should be avoided: applying myself to this alone, that I might clearly deliver the truth without injury to any man, and without party zeal; the defence of which is far from me.²⁸

2.2. *Witsius' analysis of the controversy*

Upon examination of the books from both sides that were sent to him, Witsius categorized what he believed to be the primary contested doctrines into six general headings. He then further divided each general heading into several sub-headings.

The first area of controversy, which contains six sub-headings, concerns the accomplishment of salvation by the Lord Jesus Christ. Issues discussed are doctrines related to imputation, federal headship, Christ's suffering and the result of Christ's death.

The second general heading deals with the application of salvation. Under the rubric of four sub-points the subjects addressed are the timing of the application of salvation to the elect and what precisely is imputed to the elect.

The doctrine of Justification is the focus of the third general heading, which like the first has six sub-points. The points of contention elucidated are the Pauline doctrine of faith and the works of the law, the na-

²⁶ See Thomas Bell in Herman Witsius, *Conciliatory Animadversions*, 11.

²⁷ Ernest F. Kevan, *The Grace of Law: A Study in Puritan Theology* (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, n.d.; repr., Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1993), 37.

²⁸ Witsius, *Conciliatory Animadversions*, 9.

ture of justifying faith, the role of faith in justification, the role of repentance in justification, and the sins of the justified.

The fourth heading is the covenant of grace, with two sub-points. First, what is the relationship between the covenant of grace and the covenant of redemption? Are they the same or are they distinct? Second, is the covenant of grace conditional for the elect?

The role and use of good works in salvation is the topic of the fifth general heading. Witsius gives his opinion on five contested points dealing with the purpose, ground and result of good works in the life of a believer.

The final general heading concerns the preaching of the Law and the Gospel. One issue is examined, namely: "In what manner and order the preaching of the law should accompany the gospel."²⁹

The above analysis is comparable to that of Robert Traill, one of the players on the so-called Antinomian side. In his brief tract, *A Vindication of the Protestant Doctrine Concerning Justification*, Traill identified four areas of contention: the imputed righteousness of Christ, the nature of justifying faith, the role of faith in justification and federal headship.³⁰ Similarly, Peter Toon has recently written:

The main points of controversy were the doctrines of justification and Christ's Satisfaction, and developing out of these doctrines such questions as: Is the covenant of grace conditional? Is the Gospel a new law of grace? And when does justification take place?³¹

2.3. *Witsius' judgment of the controversy*

As might be expected from an outside arbiter, Witsius does not fully agree with either side and takes both to task on various issues. He also discovers much common ground so that he is optimistic about the possibility of reconciliation. But before we look at these things in detail, we will examine what Witsius says about language. For he does have some choice words about their choice of words.

2.3.1. Language

One area in which the Dutchman heavily criticizes the so-called Antinomian side is their manner of expression. Although he avoids names, Tobias Crisp and his defenders are primarily in his crosshairs.

Witsius accuses the one side of using "hard expressions, and such as are unknown to the Holy Spirit; which can scarcely but offend tender ears."³² He is not surprised at all that many have been incapable of a proper interpretation because the "author, by a singular turn of mind, pursues, and in which he delights, strikes such horror into the hearers,

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 179.

³⁰ *The Works of Robert Traill* (1810; repr., Choteau, MT: Old Paths-Gospel Press, n.d.), 1:257-260.

³¹ *Hyper-Calvinism*, 53.

³² Witsius, *Conciliatory Animadversions*, 29.

that they are astonished at the unexpected speech.”³³ Indeed, the conciliator strongly desires that some of their expressions, which he calls “detestable words,” would be banished once and for all from the Reformed world.³⁴

After spending an entire chapter explaining their position on the role of good works in the life of the believer, Witsius writes:

Truly, I cannot sufficiently admire why the learned men took a pleasure so to express themselves, that nothing but stones seemed to speak; the ruggedness of which piled up in one, well nigh broke the brains of all the hearers. By such a conduct they very badly consulted not only their own character, but also the whole of the reformed religion; which very imprudently, and without any other probable cause, is exposed to the cavils and calumnies of adversaries ... What an unhappy thing is it, so to speak, and that of determined purpose, that immediately you need a tedious explication before simple and candid hearers, and an apology before the less favourable and the suspicious? Since perspicuity is the chief ornament of speech, what hindered, but that omitting all these turnings and windings in obscurity, you spoke clearly from the very beginning, what you might hope would immediately approve itself to the conscience of pious men?³⁵

Although Witsius disdains their infelicitous statements, he does acknowledge that they should be interpreted in the best light possible. In so doing, some of them can and should be given a sound interpretation; others, while not thoroughly biblical, will be less offensive.³⁶

The so-called Neonomian side is not completely immune to criticism. They are chastised for insisting on using the phrase “punishment or guilt of our sins” rather than the simple, yet biblical, word “sin” when discussing what is imputed to Christ.³⁷

To bridge the gap created by language Witsius advises that unnecessary phrases and words, which cause offense be dropped such as calling Jesus odious and abominable to the Father.³⁸ Both parties need to be willing to use Scriptural language and avoid expressions, which are “rigid,” “stubborn,” “hyperbolic,” and “unusual to the Holy Spirit,” thereby, “giving none occasion to the adversary to speak reproachfully.”³⁹

What is more, and perhaps more difficult, is that individuals, on the one hand, need to be willing to cancel, correct or retract incautious statements. On the other hand, they need to grant a “favourable interpretation” to inappropriate expressions, provided they were not spoken from “an evil design.”⁴⁰

³³ Ibid., 42. See also pg. 153.

³⁴ Ibid., 143-144.

³⁵ Ibid., 160-161.

³⁶ Ibid., 31, 42, 46, 153. Compare similar observations by Benjamin Brook, *The Lives of the Puritans*, (1813; repr., Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1996), 2:473; and E. F. Kevan, *The Grace of Law*, 32.

³⁷ Ibid., 27-28.

³⁸ Ibid., 46.

³⁹ Ibid., 192.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 192.

2.3.2. The doctrinal errors of the so-called Antinomians

One error that Witsius perceives among the so-called Antinomians is the timing of Christ's suffering for sins. Daniel Williams had charged Tobias Crisp with erroneously teaching that the elect's sins were not imputed to Christ until he was on the cross, and remained there until his resurrection.⁴¹ On this point, the Dutchman sides with Williams, asserting that Christ suffered for our sin from his incarnation to his death.⁴²

Another error concerns Christ's satisfaction. One of the key differences between Richard Baxter and John Owen regarding the atonement was whether or not Christ suffered the same (*idem*) or equivalent (*tantundem*) penalty required by God's law.⁴³ Baxter argued for *tantundem*, which provided the necessary foundation for his other views. Since the law requires the transgressor himself to suffer eternally, Christ could not have suffered the exact same penalty. Therefore, the law was relaxed at least with respect to the person and duration. From this conclusion, Baxter was able to build his controversial doctrines. Hans Boersma explains:

Indeed, by allowing for a relaxation of the law rather than insisting that Christ underwent the penalty of the law Baxter makes a fundamental decision. By opting for Grotius' and Bradshaw's notions of the atonement Baxter creates room for a continuation of the commination and penal effects of the law of innocence, for the conditionality of the new law of grace and, consequently, for man's righteousness as a necessary condition for continued and consummate justification.⁴⁴

In light of the importance of *tantundum* for Baxter, it is interesting that Witsius is unwilling to affirm that Christ was so substituted for sinners that he experienced the exact same punishment. After expressing his disagreement with John Owen, Witsius states, in accord with other divines, that "the Father demanded from the Son a sufficient ransom, and worthy of his injured majesty; yet so, that all *clemency* was not excluded, nor was every thing found in Christ's sufferings, which shall be found in the most righteous punishment of the reprobates."⁴⁵

The doctrine that actual justification precedes faith and its corollaries is a third error. Undoubtedly, not all who sided with the so-called Antinomian party held to this doctrine. Robert Traill, writing in 1692, believed that no minister in London defended it, or any other true Antinomian error for that matter.⁴⁶ However, Peter Toon has suggested that Isaac Chauncey, Thomas Cole and Richard Davis were favorably disposed to this doctrine.⁴⁷ And though John Owen explicitly denies adher-

⁴¹ *Gospel-Truth Stated and Vindicated: Wherein some of Dr. Crisp's Opinions Are Considered; And The Opposite Truths Are Plainly Stated and Confirmed*, 2nd Ed. (London: 1692), 23.

⁴² *Conciliatory Animadversions*, 38-41. See also his, *The Economy of the Covenants*, 1:210-234.

⁴³ Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn*, 41, 44, 245-254.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁴⁵ *Conciliatory Animadversions*, 51.

⁴⁶ *Works*, 1:279.

⁴⁷ *Hyper-Calvinism*, 62.

ing to it, Hans Boersma argues, at the very least, there is some tension in his thinking.⁴⁸

Whether or not certain theologians held to or leaned towards this doctrine is outside the scope of this paper. That William Pemble and William Twisse taught justification before faith and influenced others to varying degrees, including Tobias Crisp, is well established.⁴⁹ Therefore, in repudiating this doctrine, Witsius is finding faulting with Crisp, if not other people associated with the so-called Antinomian party.

Witsius firmly adheres to the Reformed understanding of election and that Christ by his satisfaction purchased a right of immunity for the elect. Indeed, he willingly speaks of the death of Christ as a general justification of the elect.⁵⁰ Yet, he does not conclude that God individually justifies the elect before faith. Decree and accomplishment are distinct from personal application.

Similarly, Witsius affirms a “union of eternal consent,” that is a decretive union between Christ and the elect. Nonetheless, there is not a true, real and mutual union until the moment of regeneration and faith.⁵¹

Accordingly, faith is not proof or an argument that justification has already been granted. Rather, as Scripture clearly indicates, justification is a fruit of faith or alternatively, faith is a cause of justification.⁵²

It also follows that there is no actual difference between the unregenerate elect and reprobate except that the former will certainly be justified because of God’s decree and Christ’s satisfaction, while the latter will continue in their condemned state. With words calculated to counter many of the expressions which flowed from Crisp’s pen, Witsius writes:

Hence it follows, that an elect person, before his regeneration, while he gives himself up to luxury, lasciviousness, and all ungodly lusts, is in the way of perdition and destruction, and in his sins appears before God as odious, abominable, most deserving of all his wrath and curse; and it is impossible for him to escape impending wrath, if he continue with obstinacy to go on in the way of wickedness. Truly, it is much safer and far more candid by sober speech to infuse these doctrines, and such as these, into a man, however certainly elected, than by the terror of the Lord he may be excited to faith, than to fill him with a persuasion, that provided he be elected, God has no more to impute to him, though he live ever so wickedly, than if he were already received into heaven. Accurately speaking, such an elect person is in reality in a condemned state, not only in the court of his own conscience, but also in the court of God, to which that of conscience should never be contrary. Then only is he absolved from damnation, as to his person, when he begins to be in Christ,

⁴⁸ *A Hot Pepper Corn*, 103-108.

⁴⁹ See Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn*, 68; Packer, *The Redemption & Restoration of Man*, 195-196, 249-250; John Flavel, *The Works of John Flavel* (1820; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1997), 3:556. It is noteworthy that in giving the “full sense” of Crisp, Chauncey says that the elect are condemned before faith *in foro conscientiae* and *in foro mundi*, but he does not mention *in foro Dei*. See his *Neonomianism Unmask’d*, Part 2:3.

⁵⁰ *Conciliatory Animadversions*, 109-110. Cf. his *The Economy of the Covenants*, 1:244, 416.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 111-112.

not according to the foreknowledge of God, but in actual union by the Spirit. Till that time, he was under the law of sin and death; then he begins to be under the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus, Rom. viii. 1, 2. This is the perpetual and the constant doctrine of the scriptures, from which we must not depart, no not in the form of words.⁵³

A fourth mistake is over the nature of justifying faith. Daniel Williams cites Crisp as teaching that the whole essence of faith is nothing but the full assurance that our sins are forgiven and Christ is ours.⁵⁴ Remaining true to his method, Witsius does not mention Crisp or any other individual by name but does address this definition.

It is his opinion that saving faith, considered ideally, includes but is not limited to full assurance. Nonetheless, the essence of faith is not to be equated with full assurance but rather with “the reception of Christ as a Saviour and Lord, and in the flight of the soul to him.”⁵⁵ Witsius expresses likely agreement on this point even though the brethren seem “to be exercised in extremes, and to love rigid and hyperbolic phrases.”⁵⁶

Placing repentance after justification is the fifth doctrinal inaccuracy. In rebutting Crisp’s statement that we are forgiven before we confess sin or repent, Williams asserts that the Scriptures teach that repentance, that is a sincere purpose of heart to turn from sin to God, is a disposing condition and faith a receiving condition for pardon and justification. Without this purpose of heart, no man accepts Christ as the way to God, as King and for sanctification. God does not pardon or justify the impenitent.⁵⁷

Chauncey defends Crisp by disputing Williams’ position. Repentance is consequently, not antecedently, necessary for pardon. Acts 2:38 teaches that repentance is no more a disposition to forgiveness than baptism, which is an ordinance to show that we have already been forgiven. Forgiveness and repentance are equally gifts of God and though we may perceive repentance first “God gives remission first; for so long as there is none of the Grace of Forgiveness bestowed there will never be true Gospel Repentance.”⁵⁸

According to Witsius, regeneration immediately awakens many graces, which intermingle and energize one another, so that it is impossible to determine which one comes first. A regenerated person simultaneously sees his sin and Christ. He goes to Christ that he may be delivered from his sins. He who receives Christ for justification also receives

⁵³ Ibid., 65-66. It would seem, therefore, that Curt Daniel is incorrect to include Herman Witsius among those who held to the doctrine of eternal justification. See Curt Daniel, “Hypercalvinism and John Gill,” unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (University of Edinburgh, 1983), 305. Cited by Carl R. Trueman, *The Claims of Truth* (Carlisle, Cumbria, United Kingdom: Paternoster Press, 1998), 209.

⁵⁴ *Gospel-Truth Stated*, 61.

⁵⁵ *Conciliatory Animadversions*, 103.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 106.

⁵⁷ Williams, *Gospel-Truth Stated*, 95-99.

⁵⁸ Chauncey, *Neonomianism Unmask’d*, Part 2:244-253.

him for sanctification and as a Priest and King.⁵⁹ Therefore, Witsius clearly argues against Crisp and Chauncey. He concludes:

Hence it follows, that that act of faith, whereby we receive Christ for righteousness, cannot be exercised, without either a previous, or at least a concomitant repentance, and a purpose of a new life. If therefore faith go before justification, as we have lately asserted; the same must be said of repentance, springing up together with it from the same principle of spiritual life.⁶⁰

Another area of disagreement relates to the sins of the justified. A chapter is spent carefully explaining the meaning of what amounts to various phrases by Crisp and defended by Chauncey, such as *God sees no sin in believers, sin does them no hurt, and confession is not necessary to obtain pardon*. They are then critiqued in the following chapter.

The root error is the failure to properly distinguish between God's relationship to his people as a Judge and as a Father.⁶¹ It is true that God does not see sin in believers as a Judge to damn them. Notwithstanding, He does see sin in believers in all of its ugliness. Moreover, their sin incurs guilt, causing them to fall under God's fatherly displeasure.

Sin certainly brings hurt upon believers, although they can never fall away from their state of justification. And when they do sin, they are required to repent and confess their sins in order to be forgiven. Confession does not spring from knowing that we are pardoned, but rather we confess in order to be pardoned. To be sure, only acts of faith please God. But faith is not in this instance believing that your sins are forgiven but in knowing that if you confess your sins God is faithful and just to forgive you of your sins.⁶²

The last error that Witsius discovers in the so-called Antinomian party deals with the good works of the believer. He appreciates their concern to safeguard free justification and to inculcate loving obedience for the glory of God. Nonetheless, he believes they go too far by derogating the role of good works and sanctification in salvation.

The problem again is a failure to make proper distinctions, which hinders them from seeing the whole truth and that it is not an either/or but in many cases a both/and. Thus, Witsius writes:

Neither because Christ is the way to life, is the practice of Christian piety therefore not the way to life. Christ is the way to life ... The practice of Christian piety is the way to life ... It is certain indeed that the true Christian lives to Christ, that is, to his glory: but it does not follow from thence that he does nothing for his own advantage ... In fine, it is not in-

⁵⁹ Robert Dabney faults John Owen for stating that saving faith in its first movement embraces Christ only in his priestly office. See his *Systematic Theology* (repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1985), 601, 664.

⁶⁰ *Conciliatory Animadversions*, 120. For similar positions on the relationship between faith and repentance see James Fraser, *A Treatise on Sanctification* (1774; reprint Audubon, NJ: Old Paths Publications, 1992), 446-452; John Ball, *A Treatise of the Covenant of Grace* (London: 1645), 349-350.

⁶¹ Cf. Flavel's analysis in his *Works*, 3:575.

⁶² *Conciliatory Animadversions*, 143.

consistent to do something from this principle, because we live, and to the end, that we may live ... And though he requires us to love him above all, yet he does not command that all love to ourselves be entirely banished.⁶³

Witsius realizes that the so-called Antinomians advocated the necessity of sanctification. The problem is that they rejected certain reasons or motivations for good works. While insisting that believers are created in Christ Jesus for good works and holiness of life is the necessary labor and occupation of God's people, they vigorously argued that Christ is the only way to life and all good works are not for our own benefit or salvation but for the glory of God. The legal covenant says, "Do this and you shall live" while the Gospel says, "Christ hath quickened thee, therefore do thou live in the life of the Son of God, and testify it by a holy activity." We are to be diligent in good works because of God's goodness and so that we might glorify Him. But we must not "carefully addict [ourselves] to the exercise of good works, that [we] may gain the eternal reward."⁶⁴

The Dutchman, of course, agrees that Christ is the way to life and that we do good works from a regenerated heart, in gratitude, and for the glory of God. But he says that is not the whole picture. The distinctions between title and possession, and a legal and evangelical sense of the principle, "Do this and you shall live," need to be observed.

Good works have no place in acquiring our right to eternal life, but they do play a role in its possession. The legal principle "Do and Live," was repeated in the Mosaic Covenant (Deuteronomy 27:26; Leviticus 18:5), though it was not actually established with Israel.⁶⁵ The evangelical version of the same principle, however, was established with Israel (Deuteronomy 30:19-20; 8:1; 30:6), and is to be applied in the New Testament. Therefore, according to the proper sense, good works are the way to life and salvation, and saints are to work for life. Witsius writes:

The practice of Christian piety is the way to life, because thereby we go to the possession of the right obtained by Christ ... In fine, it is not inconsistent to do something from this principle, because we live, and to the end, that we may live. No man eats but he lives, but he also eats that he may live. We both can and ought to act in a holy manner, because we are quickened by the Spirit of God. But we must also act in the same manner, that that life may be preserved in us, may increase, and at last terminate in an uninterrupted and eternal life.⁶⁶

On this point, Witsius is simply advocating standard Reformed and Puritan teaching. Following Bernard of Clairveau⁶⁷ and employing lan-

⁶³ Ibid., 162-164. Cf. his discussion of the motives and goals of sanctification in *The Economy of the Covenants*, 2:26-39.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 155.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 87. Cf. his *The Economy of the Covenants*, 2:182-184; Patrick Fairbairn, *The Revelation of Law in Scripture* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1869; repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1996), 155; D. Patrick Ramsey, "In Defense of Moses: A Confessional Critique of Kline and Karlberg," *WTJ* 66 (2004): 397-398.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 162, 163-164. See also pp. 98-99; *The Apostles' Creed*, 2:479-480; Anthony Burgess, *A Vindication of the Morall Law and the Covenants* (London: 1646), 32.

⁶⁷ Burgess, *A Vindication of the Morall Law and the Covenants*, 31-32.

guage from Isaiah 35:8, Matthew 7:14, and Ephesians 2:10, Reformed theologians referred to good works as “the way to walk in unto eternal life,”⁶⁸ “God’s beaten path towards the attainment of the Blessings Covenanted and Promised,”⁶⁹ “the King’s highway to heaven,”⁷⁰ “a step toward immortality,”⁷¹ and “the way to the Kingdome.”⁷² Michael Watts is thus incorrect to assert that Williams’ statement that good works are the way to heaven and necessary for salvation is a betrayal of the Reformation doctrine of justification.⁷³

Witsius also mentions that, contrary to certain statements, good works of believers are well pleasing to God and evidence of justification. On these two issues there may be agreement though some appear to be confused concerning the latter.⁷⁴

2.3.3. The doctrinal errors of the so-called Neonomians

Turning now to the doctrines that would be more distinctive of the so-called Neonomian party, the Dutchman strongly disagrees with their understanding of the atonement and its effects. Baxter taught that Christ’s death purchased salvation for all by freeing all men from the necessity of suffering the curse of the Law of Works and placing them under a new law, i.e. faith.⁷⁵ Whoever obeys this law will have the benefits of Christ’s righteousness imputed to him, become truly righteous according to the new law, and so justified. Contrary to Arminianism, only the elect will be regenerated so as to believe and be saved. Thus, Jesus died for all but did not intend to save all.

Baxter’s views of *tantendum*, headship, and imputation are consistent with this understanding. Christ did not absolutely represent the elect as if, even in a legal sense, what he did, they did. Thus, he did not, strictly speaking, take their place, obeying the law for them, and paying the exact penalty for their individual sins on the cross. To be sure, he obeyed the law and paid an equivalent penalty for sin. Nevertheless, Christ did not become one with them in a legal or representative sense,

⁶⁸ John Ball, *A Treatise of Faith* (London: 1657), 112. Cf. David Clarkson, “Justification By The Righteousness Of Christ,” in *The Works of David Clarkson* (repr., Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1988), 1:297; John Downname, *A Guide to Godlynesse* (London: 1622), 4.

⁶⁹ Francis Roberts, *The Mystery and Marrow of the Bible: Viz. God’s Covenants* (London: 1657), 795. See also Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (ed. James T. Dennison, Jr.; trans. G. M. Giger; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994), 2:189.

⁷⁰ John Sheffield, “Of Holiness,” in *Puritan Sermons 1659-1689* (1845; repr., Wheaton, IL: Richard Owen Roberts, 1981), 5:436. Cf. Thomas Brooks, “The Crown and Glory of Christianity,” in *The Works of Thomas Brooks* (ed. Alexander Grosart; Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1867; repr., New York: AMS Press, 1978), 4:151; Samuel Rutherford, *A Survey of the Spirituall Antichrist* (London: 1648), 2:37-38; Ezekiel Hopkins, “The Doctrine of the Two Covenants,” in *The Works of Ezekiel Hopkins* (ed. Charles Quick; Philadelphia, 1874; repr., Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), 2:216.

⁷¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of The Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 3:17:15.

⁷² George Downname, *A Treatise of Justification* (London: 1633), 438.

⁷³ *The Dissenters*, 294-295.

⁷⁴ *Conciliatory Animadversions*, 167-168.

⁷⁵ This discussion of Baxter’s view is based upon Packer’s *The Redemption & Restoration of Man* and Boersma’s, *A Hot Pepper Corn*.

paying the guilt of their particular sins. He suffered for mankind in general, not for the elect in particular.

Consequently, the elect who believe have the benefits of Christ's righteousness imputed to them, not the actual righteousness itself. According to Baxter there is no direct exchange of persons so that we receive Christ's righteousness, and he receives our sin or guilt.

This enables Baxter to abjure any kind of *ipso facto* procurement of salvation, maintain his universalism and avoid any hint of justification before faith. Between the accomplishment of salvation and its application is the mediation of the new law. Baxter vigorously denied that Christ's death acquired salvation for the elect, giving them a right or title to it. Rather, Christ's death only made salvation possible, while God's decree made it certain that the elect would in time enjoy that salvation by meeting the condition.

Witsius objects to the above or similar position.⁷⁶ He believes that Christ did not achieve a bare possibility of salvation but actual salvation for the elect, giving them a right to all the benefits of the covenant of grace. It is impossible for the elect to be condemned or excluded from the possession of salvation. In fact:

Nothing remains for the elect to suffer or to do, whereby they may procure to themselves immunity from punishment, or a right unto life: but only, that every one in their time, enjoy the right purchased by Christ, and the possession in virtue of that self-same right.⁷⁷

Furthermore, the elect's sins are imputed to Christ and Christ's very righteousness, obedience and holiness, and not merely the benefits of his righteousness, are imputed to the elect. As Heidelberg Catechism #60 teaches, Christ's satisfaction and holiness are so imputed to the elect as if they had not sinned and as if they had obeyed.⁷⁸

Not surprisingly, Witsius also takes issue with the correlative view of faith in justification. Faith is not the condition of justification under the Gospel as perfect obedience was under the Law. To do so is to introduce a new law, which corrupts the gospel.⁷⁹

The nature of faith is another error that Witsius discusses. Once again he strongly objects, stating that the brethren differ only a little, if at all, from Socinus by defining faith as "a certain new manner of mind, and life, and obedience to the commands of Christ."⁸⁰

Although obedience is inseparable from faith, they are not to be identified. The Scriptures speak of faith as a singular virtue, distinct from other virtues, and from obedience to the commands of Christ, or evan-

⁷⁶ Witsius: "And here they by no means obtain my assent, who think that Christ by taking our sins upon him, and satisfying for them, purchased our reconciliation unto God, and therefore eternal life, only upon condition, that then only that merit can have its effect in us, if we believe; so that the possibility of our salvation is purchased by Christ, but salvation itself remains to be communicated by God as the supreme Lord, to whom he thinks fit, and upon what conditions he shall be pleased to prescribe," *Conciliatory Animadversions*, 54-55.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 55. Cf. *The Economy of the Covenants*, 1:234-244, 405-406.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 69-72. See also pp. 33-36.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 112-114. Cf. *The Economy of the Covenants*, 1:410-415.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 92-93.

gelical holiness. Therefore, one must not include under the name of faith: hope, sorrow for sin, purpose of a new life and obedience. This not only corrupts the meaning of faith, but also the Gospel.⁸¹

One last error that we will mention is the denial of forgiveness of all sins in justification. Without referencing the source, Witsius answers the objection that it is contrary to all reason that God would pardon future sins. If future sins were not forgiven, there could be no assurance nor could Paul say that there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. God grants a general, judicial pardon in justification, and issues a particular paternal pardon for sins after justification.⁸²

2.3.4. Doctrinal agreement between the two parties

Most of Witsius' arrows appear to be directed towards doctrines espoused by Tobias Crisp and Richard Baxter. The problem, however, was that both sides of the controversy did not strictly follow either. Traill disavows Crisp as the standard of their doctrine, and Williams acknowledges that he disagrees with Baxter in some things.⁸³ Attacking or defending either of these figures most likely raised suspicions, leading both parties to misrepresent each other.⁸⁴

More than likely, Witsius understood this as he sought to highlight agreement between the two. He particularly comes to the defense of Daniel Williams, whom he mentions by name.

One example is the issue of the exchange of persons, which was a key element in the debate between Williams and Chauncey. On the one hand, he comes to the aid of the Independents by saying that their harsh explanations of imputation and the exchange of persons—such as calling Christ the greatest sinner—should be interpreted favorably. On the other hand, he quotes part of a conciliatory letter, written by the Presbyterians, affirming an exchange of persons in a legal sense and that Christ came in the place of the elect to answer for their violation of the law of works. Witsius then says: “Thus far the learned men; and what impartial person can desire more?”⁸⁵

Another example is the role of faith in justification. After demolishing what is a Neonomian position, Witsius quotes Daniel Williams, indicating that his view is orthodox. He then approvingly cites the aforementioned conciliatory letter on this issue, concluding: “If these things are spoken in sincerity, and faithfully maintained, as charity, which suspects nothing rashly, bids us believe, truly I do not see, that much controversy, as to this point, can remain.”⁸⁶

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 95, 113.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 135-137.

⁸³ Traill, *Works*, 1:261; Williams, *A Defense*, 47.

⁸⁴ Both sides often complained of being misrepresented.

⁸⁵ *Conciliatory Animadversions*, 37. See also pp. 46-47, where Witsius quotes the same letter affirming that the guilt of our sins were laid on Christ and that the Father was offended and angry with Him. He then writes: “If these things are granted on both sides, as is just, what controversy can remain?” A copy of this conciliatory letter is found in Daniel Williams, *An End to Discord* (London: 1699), 22-25.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 117-118.

Concerning the disputed points regarding the covenant of grace, Witsius finds so much agreement that if “party zeal, and the obstinacy of defending what has once been said, were laid aside” it is likely that little controversy would remain.⁸⁷

Those who stress the unconditionality aspect of the covenant tend to conflate the covenant of redemption and covenant of grace, making them one, as did Chauncey and Crisp.⁸⁸ And those who emphasize the conditionality of the covenant separate the two, as did Williams and Baxter.⁸⁹ Witsius winsomely attempts to demonstrate that both sides are closer than they think.

Both sides acknowledge a covenant of redemption between the Father and the Son concerning the accomplishment of salvation of the elect. And both sides grant a certain covenantal transaction between God and the elect, though some may not include it in their definition of the covenant of grace. For who can deny that Scripture teaches that God establishes covenants with man? The Mosaic Covenant was between God and Israel, and it contained nothing opposed to the covenant of grace; indeed it supposed that covenant, as least with respect to the elect (Psalm 103:17-18). Therefore, Witsius concludes:

Only, I contend at present, that they evince in general, that besides the eternal covenant between the Father and the Son, there is a certain covenant made in time, betwixt God and the elect.⁹⁰

It is also true that those who stress the unconditionality of the covenant tend to speak of faith and repentance as benefits and not conditions of the covenant. Hence Chauncey says that faith and repentance:

belong to the promise ... and therefore are no Conditions; they are benefits ... And therefore Pardon is not promised to Faith and Repentance, as things distinct from the Promise; but Pardon is promised together with Faith and Repentance to the Sinner.⁹¹

Witsius seeks reconciliation on this point by noting that both sides confess that Christ fulfilled the condition, strictly speaking, of the covenant whereby the elect acquire freedom from punishment, or a right to life.⁹² Further, both parties believe that the covenant includes absolute or

⁸⁷ Ibid., 145-146.

⁸⁸ *Neonomianism Unmask'd*, Part 1:27. Flavel states that this is one of the errors of Antinomianism (*Works*, 3:587).

⁸⁹ Williams, *A Defense*, 39; Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn*, 214.

⁹⁰ *Conciliatory Animadversions*, 147.

⁹¹ *Neonomianism Unmask'd*, Part 1:28-29.

⁹² Witsius: “A condition of a covenant, properly so called, is *that action, which being performed, gives a man a right to the reward* ... The condition of justification, properly speaking, is perfect obedience only ... Though some of the Reformed have said, that *faith is a condition, sine qua non, without which we cannot* be justified; yet they were far from being of opinion, that faith is a condition properly so called, on performing which, man should, according to the gracious covenant of God, have a right to justification as to a reward...The genuine opinion of the reformed is this: that faith justifies, as it is the bond of our strictest union with Christ, by which all things that are Christ’s become also ours,” *The Economy of the Covenants*, 1:284, 413, 415.

unconditional promises. Therefore, faith and repentance are rightly called benefits of the covenant. Yet, it is undeniable that Scripture teaches that the covenant of grace is conditional (Romans 10:8-9; John 13:17; 14:23).⁹³ Faith is the antecedent condition, while sanctification or good works is the consequent condition. Witsius optimistically concludes: "If in all these things there be an agreement, as I hope there will; strange, brethren, what is it concerning which you contend on this head?"⁹⁴

2.3.5. Law and Gospel

Concerning the manner of the preaching of the Law and Gospel, Witsius says:

And thus both law and gospel should be preached in the highest point of perfection, under the evangelical economy; so that by the gospel nothing may be detracted from the obligation of the law, in as far as it enjoins holiness becoming God; nor by the law any thing in the least derogated from the superabundant grace of the gospel.⁹⁵

And with respect to the order, he writes:

But in what order is this preaching to be conducted? To me the question seems almost superfluous and unprofitable, since the preaching of both should always be conjoined The order of a discourse is arbitrary, and to be prudently varied, according to the variety of subjects and persons ... Hence it is evident, how law and gospel mutually assist one another, in promoting the salvation of the elect; and how sometimes the former, sometimes the latter, takes the lead.⁹⁶

2.3.6. Conclusion

In conclusion, Witsius draws three general inferences, which if both sides follow, should foster reconciliation. The first two deal with language and interpretation, which we have previously discussed. The third, interestingly enough, is couched in terms to arrest the attention of the so-called Antinomian party. In four different ways, he says that if we assert free grace we must be careful not to denigrate the importance of sanctification or give pretext to licentiousness.⁹⁷

⁹³ Witsius: "In this sense some condition is to be admitted in the covenant of grace; inasmuch as it signifies a duty according to the will of God, to be performed by man, in a manner agreeable to the nature of that covenant, before he enter upon the possession of consummate salvation," *Conciliatory Animadversions*, 149.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 149. Similarly, Francis Turretin observes that faith and repentance/obedience are "to be considered at the same time both as the duties of man and as the blessings of God," *Institutes*, 2:184.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 187-188.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 188-191.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 192-193.

3. The Impact of Conciliatory Animadversions

It is somewhat difficult to ascertain the impact of Witsius' book on the English non-conformist controversy, especially since I have been unable so far to locate any references to it by those involved. The fact remains, however, that though the heated exchanges died down at the end of the decade with the publications of *A Declaration of the Congregational Ministers In and About London, Against Antinomian Errours*, and Williams' *An End to Discord*, reunion between the two sides in London did not occur. Thus, Witsius' efforts had little or no immediate impact.

A couple tentative comments will be given in an attempt to explain this lack of influence. Witsius' contribution came too late to do any immediate good. By 1696 both sides were deeply hardened in their positions, which were at opposite ends of the spectrum. That the controversy involved non-conformists and revolved around the *articulus stantis vel cadentis ecclesiae* served only to widen the gap and heighten the rhetoric. Witsius was given a nearly impossible task and entered the fray well past the point of no return.

Also, both sides included important individuals that leaned too far in opposite directions and therefore could not meet Witsius or each other in the middle. Two examples are Isaac Chauncey and Daniel Williams. The former traveled in the direction of Crispianism and Antinomianism and the latter towards Neonomianism and Baxterianism.⁹⁸ Later history seems to support this thesis as some Presbyterian churches turned to Arminianism and Arianism, while some Congregational churches embraced Hyper-Calvinism.⁹⁹

Conclusion

Conflict is inevitable among sinners, including redeemed sinners who have yet to be perfected. For this reason Jesus gave directions to deal with divisions and conflicts in the church (Matthew 18). Following these directions, however, will not necessarily lead to healing and reunion as the English Non-Conformist debate in the 1690's demonstrates.

At the end of the seventeenth century, division among the Presbyterians and Independents in London led them to appeal to the Dutch theologian Herman Witsius. Sadly, his judgment did not result in reconciliation. Nevertheless, the time and hard work spent to help these brethren was not wasted. His book continues to speak to us today, and can assist us as we wrestle with some of these same issues.

⁹⁸ See Toon, *Hyper-Calvinism*, 54-65.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

Addendum

Conciliatory Animadversions

Six Chief Heads of Controversy

- I. "Concerning the way and manner of obtaining salvation." Six points of dispute:
 - A. "Whether only the punishment due to the sins of the elect, or the very sins of the elect, both as to their stain and as to their guilt, are translated to Christ as Surety."
 - B. "Whether Christ on account of that translation, was, and ought to be called, as great a sinner as the elect themselves, yea, the greatest of all sinners."
 - C. "Whether by the suretiship of Christ there be a certain exchange of persons between him and the elect."
 - D. "Whether the translation of sins to Christ, and his carrying them, began in his crucifixion, and terminated in his resurrection from the dead."
 - E. "Whether, at that time when he chiefly carried the sins of the elect, he was separated from God, was odious and abominable to him, and whether God did then abdicate his Son, and again acknowledge him for his Son, when he raised him from the dead."
 - F. "Whether Christ, by taking upon him the sins of the elect, and satisfying Divine justice, absolutely purchased eternal salvation for them; or this only, that they could be saved, and in reality should, if they believe."

- II. "Concerning the application of the purchased salvation." Four points of disputes:
 - A. "Whether the right to the eternal inheritance be applied to the elect at their first nativity: and the date of application is to be fixed at their natural generation, whereby they become men, not at their supernatural generation, whereby they become Christians."
 - B. "Whether God imputes no more in point of guilt to the elect, even when living in all the excess of wickedness and lasciviousness, than when after they are truly sanctified, yea, also perfected and received into heaven."
 - C. "Whether the elect are united to Christ before faith."
 - D. "Whether not only the fruits of Christ's righteousness, but also the righteousness itself, be imputed to them, so that by that imputation they become no less righteous and holy, than Christ himself."

- III. "Concerning justification." Six points of dispute:
 - A. "Whether Paul, when disputing concerning justification, handles this controversy almost only, whether salvation is obtained by the observation of the Mosaic laws, either alone or by them-

- selves, as the Jews contended, or by them when joined to the gospel, as the Judaizing Christians disputed; or whether, by a life framed according to the prescriptions of the gospel, without the Mosaic ceremonies.”
- B. “Whether, consequently, the faith intended by Paul in the matter of justification signifies partly the doctrine of the gospel, in opposition to the Mosaic law; partly the practice of spiritual holiness, according to the prescription of the gospel, in opposition to the works prescribed by the law of Moses; or a certain singular virtue, which, apart from other virtues, relates to justification.”
- C. “Whether, if justifying faith denotes a singular virtue, its essence consists in an inward and a most firm and full persuasion, that Christ is mine, and that all my sins are certainly forgiven my for his sake.”
- D. “Whether, in justification, faith be considered as an evidence and an argument that it is already granted, or as a condition pre-required by God in order to it, or as an instrument by which I lay hold on the righteousness of Christ.”
- E. “Whether sorrow for sins committed, penitence and repentance, as a certain disposing condition, precede the remission of sins.”
- F. “Whether all sins, not only past, but also future, are, in justification, so forgiven together and at once to believers, that God sees no more sin in the justified, that no deformity of sin, no guilt, no burden lies upon them, that no sin however great can truly hurt them, that God is not offended with any of their transgressions, that they need neither humiliation, nor confession, nor prayers, in order to obtain the pardon of sin recently committed; finally, that immediately after the committing of sin, they are as certain of pardon, as after the deepest humiliation.”
- IV. “Concerning the nature and genius of the covenant of grace.” Two points in dispute:
- A. “Whether it consists entirely in that eternal compact between the Father and the Son, as the representative head of all the elect, whereby the Son undertook, according to the will of the Father, to do all things worthy of the Divine perfections, that the elect might obtain salvation in a manner becoming God: or whether there must also be acknowledged a certain compact between God and the elect, concerning the manner whereby they may actually become partakers of the salvation purchased by Christ.”
- B. “Whether Christ so took upon himself all the conditions of the covenant of grace, that no condition at all is required, or can be required of the elect, to be performed by the grace of God, through the merit of Christ, prior to the actual possession of salvation.”
- V. “Concerning the utility of holiness and good works.” Five points in dispute:

- A. "Whether it be justly said that good works are of no profit to us, in order to the possession of salvation; so, that though they are acknowledged not to be the cause of reigning, they cannot be reckoned even the way to the kingdom: that whatever good we do, we do it not for ourselves, but for Christ: that nothing is to be done that we may live, but because we live."
 - B. "[Whether it be justly said] that it is unlawful to do any good with the intention, that by doing it we may promote our own salvation."
 - C. "[Whether it be justly said] that there is no duty of virtue or holiness, however perfectly performed, whereby we can gain even the least good to ourselves, either in this life, or in that which is to come. For that no evil or hurt can be avoided by so doing, neither can peace of conscience, nor joy in the Holy Ghost, nor assurance of the remission of sins, nor consolation be promoted in this way."
 - D. "[Whether it be justly said] that the exercise of holiness and good works is not to be reckoned a proper, and even a sufficient evidence and argument, that we are in a state of grace, and in the certain expectation of glory."
 - E. "[Whether it be justly said] that even the sincere holiness of believers, proceeding from the Spirit of grace, is in its exercise, filthiness and dung before God; and that consequently he who studies holiness with all the diligence he can, is not a whit more pleasing and acceptable to God, than if he neglected it, or indulged himself in vice."
- VI. "Concerning the preaching of the Law and the Gospel." The point of dispute: "In what manner and order the preaching of the law should accompany the gospel."