

A Short Declaration of the Westminster Assembly,
by Way of Detestation of the Doctrine that
God is the Author of Sin

1645

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This work was edited from:

'VII - A Short Declaration of the Westminster Assembly by Way of Detestation of the Doctrine that God is the Author of Sin' *The Presbyterian Review*, vol. 6, no. 22 (April, 1885), pp. 315-318, bound with vol. 6, no. 21 (Jan., 1885)

Compared with:

'A Short Declaration of the Assembly of Divines, by Way of Detestation of this Abominable & Blasphemous Opinion, that God is, & has an Hand in & is the Author of the Sinfulness of his People, Mentioned in a Book Entitled, *Comfort for Believers About their Sins & Troubles*. Together with the Orders of Both Houses of Parliament for the Burning of the Said Book by the Hand of the Common Hangman' (London: Printed by John Field for Ralph Smith, at the Sign of the Bible in Cornhill, Near the Royal Exchange, July 25, 1645)

Introduction

Charles A. Briggs¹

John Archer² was minister of Allhallows, Lombard street, London, from which he was suspended by Archbishop Laud for non-conformity. He went to Holland, and became pastor of the English church at Arnheim [until his death]. Thomas Goodwin³ was associated with him in the ministry of this church. He was an Independent, a leader among the Pre-millenarians [Premillennialists] and unsound in many other doctrines. His most famous work is *The Personal Reign of Christ upon Earth* (London, 1642), which passed through many editions. In 1645, shortly after his death, the following treatise was issued:

Comfort for Believers about their Sins & Troubles, in a Treatise Showing that True Believers, how Weak soever in Faith, Should Not be Oppressed or Perplexed in Heart By Anything Whatever Befalls Them, Either in Sin or Afflictions. Together with Diverse Other Comfortable Observations, Gathered Out of that Counsel Given by Christ to his Apostles, & in Them to All Believers, in John, Chap. 4, verses 1-4, by John Archer.

This treatise [of 200 pages] produced great excitement in London and called forth the condemnation of the British Parliament and the Westminster Assembly, as appears from the following tract, which is extremely scarce and which is now republished [in 1885] for the first time from the original in the library of the Union Theological Seminary, New York City.

¹ Briggs (1841-1913) was a liberal, American presbyterian (and later episcopal) scholar and historian. His extensive researches into the Westminster Assembly are manifest in three journal articles of his on the Assembly and its confession. This introduction is taken from 'VII - A Short Declaration of the Westminster Assembly...' *Presbyterian Review*, vol. 6, no. 22 (April, 1885), p. 315.

² For more on Henry Archer (d. 1642), also known as John Archer, see '[Henry Archer \(Fifth Monarchist\)](#)' at Wikipedia.

³ Goodwin (1600-1680) was a noted Independent puritan.

The Sabbath Day, July 12, 1645

Complaint being this day made to the Lords in Parliament by the [Westminster] Assembly of divines that a certain blasphemous and heretical book, entitled, *Comfort for Believers about their Sins & Troubles*, is printed and published, being written by John Archer, Mater of Arts, sometime preacher at All-Hallowes, Lumbard street, London, deceased: which unless suppressed, will prove very mischievous and derogatory to this Church and State. Their Lordships much abhorring the said blasphemies, do award and adjudge:

1. That the said book shall be burnt by the hand of the common hangman in the new Palace, Westminster, in the midst of Cheapside and in the middle of Smithfield, in the County of Middlesex, with all convenient speed.
2. That the printer shall be found out, who is to declare to this house by what authority and by whose direction he printed and published the said book.
3. That all the said books shall be called in and no more to be sold, upon the displeasure of this House; and that all such who have any of the said books in their hands, as well private persons as booksellers, shall bring them unto the sheriffs of London, or one of them, as they will answer the contrary at their perils unto this House.
4. That the Assembly of divines are desired to draw up a detestation of the said book, which is publicly to be read by an officer at the burning thereof; and that some of the said Assembly be present at the same time.

- John Brown, Cleric of the Parliaments

July 14, 1645

Ordered by the Commons assembled in Parliament, that a book entitled, *Comfort for Believers about their Sins & Troubles*, shall be forthwith publicly burnt by the hand of the common hangman: some of them in the Palace-yard and other some in Cheapside, Smithfield, Paul's Church-yard and the Exchange; and that the master and wardens of the Company of Stationers,⁴ and every other person in whose hands any of them do now remain, do deliver the same to the sheriffs of London and Middlesex, who are hereby required to see this order put in due execution.

- H: Elsynge, Cler. Parl. D. Com.

Ordered, etc. that the Assembly of divines do appoint some of their members to be present at the burning of these books, and to declare to the people the abominableness of it; and if there be cause, to vindicate the author.

- H: Elsynge, Cler. Parl. D. Com.

⁴ The regulated guild of printers and booksellers in London. They also had a role in censorship.

A Short Declaration of the Assembly of Divines, Agreed upon with None Dissenting

As it has pleased the Honorable Houses of Parliament out of their pious care for preserving religion pure from the leaven of pernicious and blasphemous doctrine to order the burning of this most scandalous book, so have they further appointed us to declare the abominableness thereof unto the people. And we doubt not but every good Christian, as soon as he shall hear the scope and contents of it, will, together with us detest the horrid blasphemy therein asserted and acknowledge the godly zeal, wisdom and justice of Authority in commanding it, as an execrable thing, to be taken away, that it may not remain amongst us to provoke God's wrath and to produce such perilous and pernicious fruits whereby the souls of many may be corrupted to their everlasting destruction.

For whereas that most vile and blasphemous assertion whereby God is avowed to be the Author of sin has hitherto by the general consent of Christian teachers and writers, both ancient and modern, and these as well Papists as Protestants, been not disclaimed only, but even detested and abhorred: yet in this book it is not closely intimated or occasionally hinted at, or inconsiderately and through inadvertency stumbled upon, but openly, in express terms and in a very foul manner propounded, maintained and purposely at large prosecuted, to wit:

- a) That "God is, and has a hand in, and is the Author of the sinfulnesses of his people;" (p. 37)
- b) That "He is the Author, not of those actions alone, in and with which sin is, but of the very pravity, ataxy, anomy, irregularity and sinfulness itself which is in them;" (p. 36)
- c) That "God has more of a hand in men's sinfulness than they themselves;" (p. 37)
- d) That "the creatures' sin does produce the greatest good, either in God's glory or in the creatures' happiness, as the next cause thereof, and that all that good is only brought about by sin;" (pp. 38-39)
- e) That "it is as incongruous and inconvenient to make God the Author of the afflictions of the creature, as of the sins;" (p. 39)

- f) That “by sins believers are as much nurtured and fitted for Heaven as by anything else;” (48)
- g) That “God fits believers for service in this world by leading them into sins;” (p. 48)
- h) That “no course is so full to remove or prevent sinful or pernicious troubles for sin, as this looking on God, the Author of it, and the good which He brings about by it,” which, “because it is rarely done by believers, and indeed hardly known,” he therefore professes to have “enlarged himself upon it.” (p. 52)

In these and many other like terms has he set forth this blasphemous doctrine. And further, he condemns our orthodox writers for that they have only granted:

- i) “That God is willing sin should be, and that He permits it and orders circumstances about its production, and overrules it, and has an hand in, and is the Author of the physical or moral act⁵ in and with which sin is,” saying that “they have herein erred on the other hand, and made sin more of the creature and itself, and less from God than it is.” (pp. 36-7)

Besides, the main scope of the book is to persuade men:

- k) “Not to be oppressed or perplexed in heart for anything whatsoever befalls them, either in sin or affliction;” (p. 4)

As if our Savior, when He says, ‘Let not your hearts be troubled’ [Jn. 14:1] (for that is the ground upon which he builds) had intended to dehort his disciples from being troubled for their sins.

Very great is both the danger and scandal which would from so detestable a position as this arise if it should be suffered without control to be published and dispersed abroad, especially in such a time as this, when, on the one hand, multitudes make use of the specious name of ‘liberty’ for a cloak of naughtiness and of admitting and professing many perverse and corrupt opinions exceedingly injurious to the Gospel of Christ and to the power of godliness, and on the other hand, many watch for our halting and glory in nothing more against us than in those advantages which the

⁵ That is, in an act with some goodness in it, God is, insofar, an efficient author of that act, though not of the degree of sin that inheres in that act.

weakness and instability of such as are carried about with every wind of doctrine and are not settled and rooted in the truth, do most unhappily minister unto them, to the unspeakable prejudice of the Church of Christ and obstructing of that blessed Reformation which is by all good men so earnestly desired. Exceeding dangerous it is unto the souls of men, both as a means to instill into them blasphemous and impure conceits of the majesty of our most holy God, as also by working them to a slighting and disregarding of sin, and consequently letting loose the reins to all corrupt and licentious living (for how much less usually is the trouble after sin is committed by the greater the boldness in the committing of it).

And the scandal hence arising is every whit as great, both in regard of the offence which is thereby given unto the Reformed Churches, who in their public confessions make Satan and man himself the only causes or authors of sin; and some of them do in those their confessions by name damn this wicked position: and also in regard of the great advantage which it gives to our common adversaries, the Papists, who have hitherto only calumniously charged the doctrine of the Reformed Churches with so odious a crime (in the meantime confessing that we do in words deny it, as well as they themselves); whereas now, should this book be tolerated, they might justly insult over us and publish to the world that now in the Church of England it was openly and impugny maintained that God is the Author of sin, other than which there is not any one point whereby they labor in their sermons and popular orations to cast a greater odium (though most injuriously) upon the Reformed Churches.

And albeit the person mentioned to be the author of this book has been of good estimation for learning and piety: yet since it has so deeply wounded the honor and truth of God, we ought not at all to be by any such consideration withheld from declaring our just detestation of so odious a book: for if any man, yea if an angel from Heaven preach anything contrary to the Gospel of Christ, the apostle is not afraid to pronounce him accursed [Gal. 1:8]; and indeed it is a very dangerous thing (and so much the more dangerous by how much it is the more ordinary and usual) to take up new and corrupt opinions upon trust, only on this inducement, namely a persuasion which we have of the sanctity of those persons who are the authors of them; for we ought to try the spirits whether they be of God [1 Jn. 4:1], and to search the Scriptures whether the things taught us be so or no [Acts 17:11]; and having tried all things, to hold fast that which is good [1 Thess. 5:21], and upon no pretense whatsoever to depart from the form of sound words in the Scriptures delivered unto us [2 Tim. 1:13], or for

the reverence or estimation of any man's person to entertain any such opinions as do in the very words of them asperse the honor and holiness of God and are by all the Churches of Christ rejected. And therefore most justly has Authority appointed execution in this manner to be done upon this book.

July 17, 1645

Henry Robrough, Scriba.
Adoniram Byfield, Scriba.

The End