

Studies in the Westminster Confession of Faith

*Newtownabbey Free Presbyterian Church Rev Brian McClung 6th February 2013 Chapter 3 Part 1
Ephesians 1:1,5,9,&11*

Chapter 3 - Of God's Eternal Decree

Section I - God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established. Proof Texts: *Eph 1:11; Rom 11:33; Heb 6:17; Rom 9:15,18; James 1:13,17; 1 John 1:5; Acts 2:23; Matt 17:12; Acts 4:27,28; John 19:11; Prov 16:33.*

Section II - Although God knows whatsoever may or can come to pass upon all supposed conditions, yet hath He not decreed anything because He foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions. Proof Texts: *Acts 15:18; 1 Sam 23:11,12; Matt 11:21,23; Rom 9:11,13,16,18.*

This new chapter deals with the decree of God. This is the manner in which God outworks His will and purpose. God is an intelligent, independent, and immutable Being and therefore He must have a will and purpose. *An intelligent being is one who knows and judges, who purposes ends and devises means, who acts from design, conceives a plan, and then proceeds to execute it,* John Dick's Lectures on Theology. It is better to speak of God's 'decree' instead of 'decrees' because God has only one all comprehending purpose, namely His own glory. This was why He created in the first place; this is why all things exist and all events take place.

These two sections above teach the following:

1. God from all eternity past has an unchangeable plan for all things within His creation.
2. This unchangeable plan is not in any part, conditional, that is, dependent upon unforeseen, undecreed events.
3. Within the decree of God, it never can be said that God is the author of sin.
4. Human liberty is not violated by believing in the eternal decree of God.
5. Belief in the divine decree does not take away from the existence of second causes.

1. God from all eternity past has an unchangeable plan for all things within His creation.

[1] God has a purpose or plan for this world. Anyone who believes the Bible must accept this. It is so evident, *According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love, Eph 1:4; Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself, Eph 1:9; In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will, Eph 1:11.*

[2] The Scriptures also speak of God's 'eternal' purpose: *According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord, Eph 3:11.* This eternal purpose flows from the fact that:

- i. God is an eternal and unchangeable Being. Of necessity then He must have an eternal decree.
- ii. The creation exists for one purpose alone, ie God's glory and as this is a singular purpose it again follows that He must have an eternal decree.
- iii. That God is omniscient. He has foreknowledge of all things. If there was not an eternal decree this could not be so.

[3] This purpose or decree of God takes in all things. Nothing, at all, is outside the scope of this eternal decree. All the creatures and all events are within it. The decree of God is as comprehensive as His government of the world. His government extends to all creatures and to all events. Included are:

- i. The whole course of creation in general, *In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will, Eph 1:11.*
- ii. The free acts of all mankind, *The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will, Prov 21:1; For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them, Eph 2:10; cf. Phil 2:13.*
- iii. The sinful acts of all mankind, *Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain, Acts 2:23; For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together; For to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined*

before to be done, Acts 4:27,28; cf. Ps 76:10; Prov 16:4 & cp. Gen 37:28 with Gen 45:7,8.

iv. That which might be described as 'accidental' events, *The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD, Prov 16:33; Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered, Matt 10:29,30.*

2. This unchangeable plan is not in any part, conditional, dependent upon unforeseen, undecreed events. The decree of God is free, sovereign, absolute and efficacious. He has not decreed anything, because He foresaw it as happening in the future; neither is the outworking of His decree depended upon any condition which may, or may not be performed. All that God has decreed will come to pass.

[1] It is Free. God was not compelled to decree anything, in the same fashion as He was not compelled to create anything. There was no want or lack in God that necessitated any decree. He was moved only by the good pleasure of His own will and nothing else, *Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, Eph 1:5; cf. Eph 1:9; Phil 2:13.*

[2] It is Sovereign. The decree originates and is carried through within the Godhead. The whole motive for every action comes from within the Godhead. No action of theirs is suggested or occasioned by anything outside of the Godhead. God, according to His own will, decrees what comes to pass.

[3] It is Absolute. No part of God's decree is ever dependent upon conditions not themselves determined by divine decree. John Dick's Lectures on Theology describes it thus: *It is granted, that some of the decrees of God are conditional, in this sense, that something is supposed to go before the event which is the object of the decree, and that, this order being established, the one will not take place without the other. He [God] decreed, for example, to save Paul and the companions of his voyage to Italy; but he decreed to save them only on condition that the sailors should remain in the ship, Acts ch 27. He has decreed to save many from the wrath to come; but he has decreed to save them only if they believe in Christ, and turn by him from the error of their ways.*

But these decrees are conditional only in appearance. They merely state the order in which the events should be accomplished; they establish a connection between the means and the end, but do not leave the means uncertain. When God decreed to save Paul and his companions, he decreed that the sailors should be prevented from leaving the ship; and accordingly gave Paul previous notice of the preservation of every person on board. When he decreed to save those who should believe, he decreed to give them faith; and, accordingly, we are informed, that those whom he predestinated he also calls into the fellowship of his Son, Rom 8:30. That any decree is conditional in the sense that it depends upon the will of man, of which he is sovereign master, so that he may will or not will as he pleases, - we deny. "My counsel", says God, "shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure," Isa 46:10. But he could not speak so, if his counsel depended upon a condition which might not be performed.

This is one of the areas where Reformed Theology in the W.C.F. differs from Arminianism. We do not accept the theory that God has decreed that certain events will happen upon condition that some other events, which God foresees as possible but has not decreed, will occur. This is what Arminianism believes. For example: *Arminians, admitting that God certainly foreknows the acts of free agents as well as all other events, maintain that He absolutely decreed to create man; and foreseeing that man would sin, He absolutely decreed to provide a salvation for all, and actually to save all that repent and believe; but that he conditionally decreed to save individual men, on the condition, foreseen but not foreordained, of their faith and obedience,* A A Hodge, Outlines in Theology. This makes the absolute decree of God dependent upon the uncontrollable and changeable actions of the creature. There is then nothing sure and certain about the course of events. It depends upon an action that God has not decreed. This is contrary to what the Scriptures tell us: *Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will, Eph 1:5,11.* There are simply no exceptions permitted in this statement. 'All things' means all things!

[4] It is Efficacious. When we speak of God's decree we are stating that it infallibly determines the certainty of future events. It does not mean that God's decree is the immediate cause of all events, *Matt 16:21; Luke 22:22, 24:44.* He 'determines' the certainty of these things.