

Studies in the Westminster Confession of Faith

Newtownabbey Free Presbyterian Church Rev Brian McClung 6th March 2013 Chapter 3 Part 2

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: Ephesians 1:11; Romans 11:33; Hebrews 6:17; Romans 9:15,18; James 1:13,17; 1 John 1:5; Acts 2:23; Matthew 17:12; Acts 4:27,28; John 19:11; Proverbs 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 Samuel 23:11,12; Matthew 11:21,23; Romans 9:11,13,16,18.

These two sections quoted 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.

The truth around God's decree may be summarised in the words of *Eph 1:11: 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.* We did conclude last time by highlighting that 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, *Matthew 16:21; Luke 22:22, 24:44.* His decree rather 'determines' the certainty of these things.

3. Within the decree of God, it never can be said that God is the author of sin. If this were true then we would have an insuperable objection to the doctrine of the decree of God, as God can never be the author of sin, *Psalm 92:15: To shew that the LORD is upright: he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him; Ecclesiastes 7:29: Lo, this only have I found, that God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions; James 1:13: Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man; 1 John 1:5: This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.*

It is important to maintain this distinction for two reasons: (i) God's holiness must be maintained & (ii) God holds sinners accountable for their sinful actions. In detailing therefore with the decrees of God the W.C.F. does seek to safeguard against making God, in any way, the author of sin, with respect to the sinful actions of fallen mankind or angels. The Confession of Faith expressly guards against any inference of this nature, by declaring that God has so ordained whatsoever comes to pass so as that He is not thereby the author of sin.

Louis Berkhof said: *God's decree makes God the author of free moral beings, who are themselves the authors of sin. God decrees to sustain their free agency, to regulate the circumstances of their life, and to permit that free agency to exert itself in a multitude of acts, of which some are sinful.*

In seeking to honour the righteousness of God in this matter, Reformed Theology speaks of the aspects of God's decree as either being 'effective' or 'permissive':

[1] The 'effective' aspect of God's decree. This is the easy part to understand. This relates to those events that God determined to effect through necessary causes [*that which He puts into the hearts and minds of others to do*] or His own immediate agency [*direct intervention such as creation and miracles*]. His effective decree respects all the good that comes to pass in the world. In *Phil 2:13* we have evidence of this 'effective' aspect of God's decree: *For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.*

[2] The 'permissive' aspect of God's decree. This permissive aspect relates to all the evil that is to be found in all the sinful actions of the creature. This is the much more difficult part to understand.

Within the decree of God we must distinguish between the certainty of an action, and the sinfulness of that action. The moral accountability for sinful actions belongs entirely to those who are the immediate cause of that action. For example, in the verses already mentioned above, those who betrayed and crucified Christ are those who are held morally responsible and accountable before God for those actions.

In order to bring this nearer our finite understanding we say in respect of sinful acts, that God's decree renders the future sinful act absolutely certain, but in such circumstances God determines:

- (i) not to hinder the sinful self-determination of the finite will of the fallen sinner or angel; and
- (ii) to regulate and control the result of this sinful self-determination.

This is observed in numerous Scripture verses, cf. *Psalm 78:29: So they did eat, and were well filled: for he gave them their own desire; Psalm 106:15: And he gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul; Acts 14:16: Who in times past suffered all nations to walk in their own ways; Acts 17:30: And the times of this ignorance God winked at [tolerated/permitted]; but now commandeth all men every where to repent.*

Therefore, God does not cause the evil, nor does He approve of it, He only permits the sinful agency, be they man or fallen angel, to act in performing that action, cf. *1 Kings 22:20-22: And the LORD said, Who shall persuade Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramothgilead? And one said on this manner, and another said on that manner. And there came forth a spirit, and stood before the LORD, and said, I will persuade him. And the LORD said unto him, Wherewith? And he said, I will go forth, and I will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets. And he said, Thou shalt persuade him, and prevail also: go forth, and do so.*

Our understanding of this 'permissive' aspect of the decree of God must ever be safeguarded against implying the passive permission of something, which is not under the control of the divine will. God sovereignly ordains all things that come to pass, yet cannot be described as the author of sin.

Dr Alan Cairns said of God's decree: *The Biblical doctrine of the divine decree represents God as decreeing that sin should eventuate [occur as the result] as the free act of man, not by any divine agency or inducement.*

A. A. Hodge states in his exposition of the Confession: *The same infinitely perfect and self-consistent decree ordains the moral law which forbids and punishes all sin, and at the same time permits its occurrence, limiting and determining the precise channel to which it shall be confined, the precise end to which it shall be directed, and overruling its consequences for good: But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive, Genesis 50:20.*

A further aspect of God's decree is observed in His overruling the sinful actions of men or fallen angels for His most wise and holy purposes. Louis Berkhof further said: *For good and holy reasons God renders these sinful acts certain, but He does not decree to work evil desires or choices efficiently in man. ...His decree to permit sin, while it renders the entrance of sin into the world certain, does not mean that He takes delight in it; but only that He deemed it wise, for the purpose of self-revelation, to permit moral evil, however abhorrent it may be to His nature.*

To summarise - The decree of God is 'effective' with respect to the action abstractly considered, in that it is certain to take place; it is 'permissive' with respect to the sinfulness of the action as a moral evil; God will overrule this evil for His own glory, particularly in the self-revelation of Himself in redemption to His creatures; and in maintaining this distinction we are holding to the certainty of future events as ordained by God but also maintaining that sinful creatures are and will be, held morally responsible for their own sinful actions.

As with the doctrine of the Trinity we must confess that our finite, limited understanding will fail to fully comprehend the decree of God, particularly God's relation to sin. This will remain a mystery. At best we are seeking to set down Bible principles relating to the nature of God and His foreordaining all things that come to pass and seeking to reconcile these, as best we can, with our limited intelligence. This we maintain emphatically - *God has according to the counsel of His will, whereby for His own glory, he hath fore-ordained whatsoever comes to pass*, Shorter Catechism No 7.