

Studies in the Westminster Confession of Faith

Newtownabbey Free Presbyterian Church Rev Brian McClung 15th May 2013 Chapter 3 Part 3

Proverbs 16:33

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.**

This third chapter of the Confession of Faith 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. 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.* God's decree is eternal, it was made in eternity past; unconditional, it includes all things; and immutable, it cannot be resisted. Not can we ever, when speaking of this matter, make God the author of sin. 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.

Firstly, this evening we are coming to consider the fourth of these points, namely,

4. Human liberty is not violated by believing in the eternal decree of God. There are those, both within and without professing Christianity, who argue that to believe in the eternal, unconditional, immutable decree of God is to take away human liberty and human responsibility. They that believe in God's decree on these terms leads to a form of fatalism, where a belief that as all things are foreordained by an all wise God there is therefore no point in human effort to change anything. Whatever will be, will be!

As ever we must let the Word of God answer this query. What is human liberty? Human liberty is the freedom to act without any sense of constraint, and according to a person's own free choice as governed by the deposition of their will. No one can act contrary to the deposition of their own will. A fallen will cannot make holy choices.

The divine decree operates from outside the human mind; and, while it secures the certainty of a future event, it leaves the rational creature free to act as if there had been no decree. The Word of God set forth both the eternal, unconditional and immutable nature of God's decree, while at the same time supporting the view that God's rational creatures retains their liberty of action. This is easily proved in three ways:

[1] The Scriptures teach that God holds His rational creatures responsible for their actions. We are accountable for all that we do. There is a day of judgment *when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ..., Romans 2:16.* This could never justly happen if God's rational creatures were not free agents, accountable and responsible. No excuses will be entertained by God on the day of judgment. No sinner will be able to assert that somehow God's decree made them do some sinful act.

[2] The rational creatures own conscience bears witness to the fact that they are free agents. We excuse

ourselves when we have done our duty, and accuse ourselves when we have neglected it, (*...Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another;*) *Romans 2:15*. Conscience would not work in this way if as rational creatures we were not free agents.

[3] Sinful ungodly creatures who do not acknowledge the truth of God are unaware that their actions are controlled by a sovereign God. They assert that they will do as they please and will not acknowledge the Lord or His ways. In doing this they believe that they are free agents, making their own choices.

Mere finite creatures, as we are, are not able to reconcile the boundaries of God's divine decree and human liberty and responsibility. Where divine sovereignty and human liberty and responsibility meet is unknown to us. It is enough for us to know that God has taught in His Word that He has decreed all things which come to pass, and that all rational creatures are free agents.

Secondly this evening we are coming to consider the fifth of these points, namely,

5. Belief in the divine decree does not take away from the existence of second causes. God's decree operates within the realm of secondary causes, or by the use of means as we might otherwise better understand this term. The rational creature is never to sit back and expect an outcome, even where they do believe that God's decree is eternal, unconditional and immutable, without first employing the God ordained means to bring it to pass. The secret things belong to the Lord but the revealed things belong to us. The revealed things are the means that God has ordained to bring to pass certain outcomes. For example:

[1] In the incident of Paul's shipwreck he told his fellow passengers that they would only be safe if they remained on board the vessel, *And as the shipmen were about to flee out of the ship, when they had let down the boat into the sea, under colour as though they would have cast anchors out of the foreship, Paul said to the centurion and to the soldiers, Except these abide in the ship, ye cannot be saved, Acts 27:30,31.*

[2] The kingdom of Christ is extended by the labours of the people of God, *For we are labourers together with God...1 Cor 3:9; ...Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature, Mark 16:15.*

[3] Souls are saved through the exercising of faith, *For by grace are ye saved through faith..., Eph 2:8.*

[4] Souls are to believe the truth, *But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth, 2 Thess 2:13.* These examples all involve the use of means or secondary causes.

A statement that brings these aspects very clearly together is found in *Prov 16:33: The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD.* Is there anything that seems more random, more free from outside interference than drawing lots? The ungodly employ this method in a host of different circumstances and never do they for a moment have any hesitation in asserting that they believe it to be free from divine direction. The Christian however recognises that it is subject to divine control and direction.

Lots were used to divide the land of Israel among the remaining seven tribes that had not yet received their inheritance, *Josh 18:5,10.* A lot was drawn to choose between the royal house and the people in the days of Saul and then between Saul and Jonathan, *1 Sam 14:41,42.* A lot was used to decide who would stay in the city of Jerusalem and who would live in the countryside in the days of Nehemiah, *ch 11:1.* Jonah was singled out by a lot, *Jonah 1:7.* In all of these there is the use of secondary causes, yet, in all of this God was sovereignly overruling and working out His eternal, unconditional and immutable decree.

Believing in God's decree does not decry these things, nor mitigate against their use by God's rational creatures. God's eternal, unconditional and immutable decree will be fulfilled even in the drawing of a lot.