

Chapter 3: Of God's Decree

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(Hymn 444?)

1 The proper use of the doctrine of God's decree ¶ 7

This is a doctrine that can be abused. There are those who would use this to accuse God of sin. Others, facing hard providences, may be tempted to think hard thoughts of God. We could go spinning off into wild philosophical speculations. These would be abuses of the doctrine. So I thought it would be good to start with paragraph 7. Paragraph 7 tells us about the right use of this doctrine of the decree.

It reads,

The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care, that men attending the will of God revealed in His Word, and yeilding obedience thereunto, may, from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election;(18) so shall this doctrine afford matter of praise,(19) reverence, and admiration of God, and of humility,(20) diligence, and abundant consolation to all that sincerely obey the gospel.(21)

To obtain assurance We'll see that all events are under God's authority, *especially* our interest in the Gospel. There's more assurance knowing that it depends on Him, and not on us. God's plenary sovereignty is the very mechanism of grace. We have an immediate experience of our best works; we know have to lie to ourselves to consider them sufficient. But grace is an unmerited gift.

To afford matter of praise, reverence and admiration If we rightly understand this doctrine, we'll really resonate with Ephesians 1. In Eph-

esians 1, you can clearly see this doctrine of a predestinating decree. And see how he's thrice praised for it:

1. "[H]e chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶ *to the praise of his glorious grace*"
2. "¹¹ In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, ¹² so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be *to the praise of his glory*."
3. "¹³ In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, *to the praise of his glory*."

To promote humility, and diligence We see in 2 Peter 1:10 that we ought to be diligent:

- "¹⁰ Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. ¹¹ For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." See how the Word of God sees no disagreement between divine sovereignty, and human responsibility.

For our consolation The confession offers Luke 10:20 here where we're enjoined to "rejoice that [our] names are written in heaven." When God finished creating and called it "very good," he knew about the fall, and all the history that would follow because he decreed it. God wasn't surprised, or forced to change his plans. This isn't plan B. So we can have real confidence that "that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose."

We've just finished a couple classes on the Trinity, but we have by no means left the land of high mystery. It's not time to put our sandals back on yet. The things taught in this doctrine are just as far above us as the doctrine of the Trinity, or that of the hypostatic union. While we can appreciate that we're not dealing with contradictions, we're not fully going to be able to put all this together, and feel as though we really grasp it. And if you think

you can resolve every question, and difficulty with these doctrines, you're probably a heretic.

We see in Revelation 5, that the decree is very high throne room stuff.

¹ Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals. ² And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" ³ And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it

Ecclesiastes 5:1ff

¹ Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil. ² Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few.

2 The Decree of All Events

2.1 Nothing frustrates God's Decree ¶s 1 & 2

God hath decreed in Himself, from all eternity, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably, all things, whatsoever come to pass;(1) yet so as thereby is God neither the author of sin nor hath fellowship with any therein;(2) nor is violence offered to the will of the creature, nor yet is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established;(3) in which appears His wisdom in disposing all things, and power and faithfulness in accomplishing His decree.(4)

"in Himself, from all eternity, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeable" Paragraph 2 really follows from the first clause of Paragraph 1. So I'll include it here (Nothing escapes God's decree ¶ 2):

Although God knoweth whatsoever may or can come to pass, upon all supposed conditions,(5) yet hath He not decreed anything, because He foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions.(6)

It's saying, essentially, that what God decreed was unconditional. He consulted no counselor, and submitted to no other will. His decree wasn't influenced by any factors outside himself. Indeed, there were no factors for him to consider before he began to create, *outside his own character*. This is why we really ought to consider the decree as holy, holy, holy—along with all providences (pleasant, or difficult) in our lives.

Paragraph 2 comments that the decree is not founded on foreknowledge. For example, he didn't foreordain anyone's salvation because he looked down the corridors of time and saw they'd convert under certain conditions. This may seem redundant because we just said "in Himself, from all eternity, by the . . . counsel of His own will, freely. . ." But, I think, this is an answer to Arminianism, which makes the will of man supreme in salvation, and has often argued this way.

The position of our confession is just the opposite: God's foreknowledge is founded on the decree. He knows everything, not because he has observed it, or learned it; but because he ordained it himself. Jonathan Edwards makes the Arminian absurdity clear. He says,

...if it be any thing in the creature that decides [the decree] in any way, it must be only the futuration of that thing in the creature. But this brings us to the absurdity and contradiction, that the same thing is both the cause and the effect of itself¹.

If you think that sounds awfully philosophical, you ought to see the Arminians try to explain their way out if it.

The decree is also "free and unchangeable." I was at home, sick, but I'm sure Deacon Cook, in the last chapter, expanded on how God is "infinite in [...] perfection," and how he is "without body, parts or passions." It follows from God's perfection alone that God's decree was unchanged from the beginning. His purposes were his purposes from eternity, and nothing could cause him to have a new purpose. If something happened to cause God to update his decree we would not be perfect, but approaching perfection.

A. A. Hodge says,

since he is an eternal and unchangeable Being, his plan must have existed in all its elements, perfect and unchangeable, from eternity².

¹Edwards, Jonathan. "Miscellaneous Remarks." The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume Two, Banner of Truth Trust, p. 532, ch. III, § 21.

²Archibald Alexander Hodge, The Westminster Confession: A Commentary (Monergism, n.d.), e-book, location 1067.

“all things, whatsoever come to pass” What’s excluded from that phrase? I’ll just note that this is unqualified. If you see it come to pass, it was part of His decree.

“not the author of sin nor hath fellowship with any therein”
What is meant by “author of sin?”

Noah Webster’s (1828) definition of “Author.”

1. One who produces, creates, or brings into being; as, God is the *author* of the Universe.
2. The beginner, former, or first mover of any thing; hence, the efficient cause of a thing. It is appropriately applied to one who composes or writes a book, or original work, and in a more general sense, to one whose occupation is to compose and write books; opposed to compiler or translator.

To foreordain, or to decree, is not the same as to be “the efficient cause.”

In Peter’s great Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:23), he says that Jesus was “delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.”

In Acts 4, the early Church prays for boldness in the face of Psalm 2 rebellion, they pray,

²⁷ for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, ²⁸ to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

See how they recognize the hand of God in the planning and predestining; and how they recognize the hands of Herod, Pilate, Gentiles, and Jews in the sinning.

“nor is violence offered to the will of the creature” Why would someone think the creature’s will is violated?

A creature’s will is dependent upon its nature. Fallen man doesn’t have a good nature. When a fallen, natural man acts, he sins. When God saves a man, he doesn’t violate his will. Rather, he goes over the head of the will and changes the nature. A man with a renewed nature is able to please God.

Romans 9

...not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, ⁷ and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” ⁸ This means

that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring.⁹ For this is what the promise said: “About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.”¹⁰ And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac,¹¹ though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls—¹² she was told, “The older will serve the younger.”¹³ As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”¹⁴ What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means!¹⁵ For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.”¹⁶ So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.¹⁷ For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.”¹⁸ So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

In this case, Pharaoh Amen Hotep II, acted freely. The Lord decreed the events of the Exodus—he even decreed Pharaoh’s actions, but the Pharaoh acted freely. The Pharaoh evaluated his choices, and did what he wanted to do. The Lord sovereignly ordained what Pharaoh would voluntarily do.

And lest charge God with wrong in doing this, Paul anticipates the objection:

¹⁹ You will say to me then, “Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?”

To even pose the question is to be on the wrong track. We have no right to judge the judge. He’s the standard we measure justice by.

We’ll see in Chapter 9 of the confession that we don’t exactly deny free will, though we’re accused of it. We do deny a “libertarian free will.” But we’ll talk more about it in a couple of months.

The Scriptures show how the two ideas of divine sovereignty, and free will are compatible. The classic example is Genesis 50:20.

²⁰ As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.

This is what's called compatibilism. I like to think of compatibilism as the assertion that the two ideas aren't at odds—they're compatible. Since the Scriptures show no disagreement between free will, and divine sovereignty, neither should we. There's nothing here to reconcile.

So we deny any contradiction between divine sovereignty and free will, but what about this? Is there any contradiction in God giving righteous commands, and decreeing that they'd be disobeyed by sinners? In other words, is God's will for us opposed to God's will for the course of history?

No, we're using the word "will" in two different ways. In § 15 of Edward's "Remarks," I think he clears this up. He says,

The commands and prohibitions of God are only significations of our duty and of his nature³.

That is, they're statements of what we owe to Him. So we shouldn't conflate his commands and prohibitions with his plan for all history.

"nor yet is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established" This phrase argues that the decree doesn't work against some impersonal, mechanical nature of cause and effect. Rather, cause and effect work the way they do because of the decree. We don't believe in a materialist universe.

"in which appears His wisdom in disposing all things, and power and faithfulness in accomplishing His decree" First, as God's people, we ought to be able observe and appreciate his wisdom in the providences of our daily lives. I'll point out just one facet of this wisdom by turning again to Edwards' "Remarks." In § 10, he says,

It is highly proper that the effulgent glory of God should answer his real excellency; that the splendour should be answerable to the real and essential glory, for the same reason that it is proper and excellent for God to glorify himself at all. Thus it is necessary, that God's awful majesty, his authority and dreadful greatness, justice, and holiness, should be manifested. But this could not be, unless sin and punishment had been decreed; so that the shining forth of God's glory would be very imperfect, both because these parts of the divine glory would not shine forth as the others do, and also the glory of his goodness, love, and holiness would be faint without them; nay, they would scarcely shine forth at all. [...] as it is necessary that there should be evil, because

³Edwards, Jonathan. "Miscellaneous Remarks." *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Volume Two, Banner of Truth Trust, p. 529, ch. III, § 16.

the display of the glory of God could not but be imperfect and incomplete without it, so evil is necessary, in order to the highest happiness of the creature, [...] because the creature's happiness consists in the knowledge of God, and sense of his love. And if knowledge of him be imperfect, the happiness of the creature must be proportionately imperfect⁴; ...

3 The specific decree of predestination to life

Paragraphs 3 through 6 deal with God's election of some to grace. I've heard it argued that, yes, God decrees everything in nature, but not this. God creates knowing all causes and effects in the world, and maintains the system by his providence, but man has an autonomous freedom to choose Christ. Our Confession says just the opposite—and I think we can easily gather from Scripture, that it is *especially* in the work of salvation that God's predetermining decree is at work. Question 12 of the Westminster Larger Catechism also affirms this.

3.1 Its selectivity—distinguishing election ¶ 3

With paragraph 3 we start to see God making choices in election. It says,

By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestined, or foreordained to eternal life through Jesus Christ,(7) to the praise of His glorious grace;(8) others being left to act in their sin to their just condemnation, to the praise of His glorious justice.(9)

Here we start to diverge from the Westminster Confession a bit. The Westminster says,

By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others fore-ordained to everlasting death.

I think this phrase, “fore-ordained to everlasting death” opens them up to the charge of double-predestination. I don't think there's anything really wrong with putting it the way it does, but I think our Confession more wisely illuminates the fact that God's act of election is an active thing. Whereas his act of reprobation toward others is more of a passive thing. Our default

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 528, ch. III, § 10.

destination, if God does not elect, is everlasting death. But for some men and angels God has ordained life.

3.2 Its specificity (personal election) ¶ 4

These angels and men thus predestined and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed, and their number so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished.(10)

In the Scriptures, Christ is represented as a high priest. Now, when a priest mediates, he mediates *for* someone. He didn't just open a way for salvation, like one might establish a bureaucracy; anybody can get in line and sign up. In ancient Israel, on the Day of Atonement, the sacrifice wasn't for the Amalekites.

The Confession references 2 Tim. 2:19:

¹⁹ But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: "The Lord knows those who are his,"

I think John 6 closes the case on this:

³⁷ All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. ⁴⁰ For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.

In other words, everyone the Father gives comes to Christ, and everyone who comes receives eternal life. If God were not particular in foreordaining election, absolutely everyone, without distinction, would be raised to eternal life. The alternative to definite atonement is universalism.

If that's not enough, here's Romans 8:

²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Essentially, the same group he foreknew is the same group that's glorified. We'll see in paragraph 6, that it doesn't follow from this that we ought not preach the Gospel freely.

3.3 Its cause (unconditional election) ¶ 5

Those of mankind that are predestined to life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to His eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of His will, hath chosen in Christ unto everlasting glory, out of His mere free grace and love,(11) without any other thing in the creature as a condition or cause moving Him thereunto.(12)

Our confession offers, among others, 1 Tim. 1:9 here,

⁹ [God] saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began

We're simply applying paragraph 2 to the matter of election. God's decree in election is a subset of his decree in all things. So there's no condition or state of affairs that logically precedes his decree. The whole decree, including his particular, unconditional election is a single system.

3.4 [Effectual calling] ¶ 6

As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so He hath, by the eternal and most free purpose of His will, foreordained all the means thereunto;(13) wherefore they who are elect, being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ,(14) are effectually called unto faith in Christ, by His Spirit working in due season, are justified, adopted, sanctified,(15) and kept by His power through faith unto salvation;(16) neither are any other redeemed by Christ, or effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only.(17)

Here we see that God doesn't just ordain our election, but every event leading to it. That's what is meant when it says he "foreordained all the means." Because of this the Gospel has to be preached freely to everyone. Preaching is a means of getting the elect to glory.

Our Confession aligns with Romans 10:13, where it says,

¹³ For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

And in the same passage Paul declares the means to be absolutely necessary:

¹⁴ How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?