

Chapter 3 - Of God's Eternal Decree

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; (a) yet so as thereby neither is God the author of sin, (b) nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established. (c)

a. Rom 9:15, 18; 11:33; Eph 1:11; Heb 6:17. • b. James 1:13, 17; 1 John 1:5. • c. Prov 16:33; Mat 17:12; John 19:11; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28.

Johannes Wollebius (1589–1629): “A decree of God is an internal act of the divine will, by which he determines, from eternity, freely, with absolute certainty, those matters which shall happen in time.”

J. V. Fesko, *Theology of the Westminster Standards*: “God ordains the occurrence of all things but in such a way that human beings are responsible for their actions. With this qualification the divines affirm both necessity and contingency; whatever God ordains necessarily comes to pass, but it can and will come to pass contingently. What do they mean, however, by contingency? Contingency...means that something could be otherwise. God's decree, for example, is contingent in the sense that he was under no external or internal necessity to decree anything—he was free to decree and free not to decree. Hence, the decree is contingent in its genesis. But once God decrees it, there is no longer contingency from the divine perspective, as the divines assert: “In his sight all things are open and manifest; his knowledge is infinite, infallible, and independent upon the creature, so as nothing is to him contingent, or uncertain” (2.2). As it pertains to creatures, however, the divines state that the decree, far from taking away freedom and contingency, establishes it. Without God decreeing to create creatures that have the freedom to choose among various options, there would be no freedom whatsoever because free creatures would not exist.”

Fesko: “Twisse elaborates upon these two points by noting that God, as an efficacious agent, can ordain to bring something to pass either necessarily or contingently, “producing necessary things necessarily, and agents rationally for the producing of contingent things, contingently and freely.” Twisse illustrates this point by noting that God preordained that Josiah would burn the bones of the prophets upon the altar (2 Kings 23:16) and Cyrus would proclaim liberty to the Jewish exiles so they could return to Israel (Ezra 1:1–2), but then he asks rhetorically, “What sober Divine hath made doubt whether Josias and Cyrus did not herein, that which they did freely?” Twisse cites a second example in God's decree that none of Christ's bones should be broken, and then writes, “Yet what sober man should make question, whether the Souldiers did non [sic] as freely abstaine from breaking Christs bones?”

Fesko: “As complex as these things might be, Reformed theologians have long maintained the seemingly contradictory teachings of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. This is no mere isolated phenomenon in the Reformed tradition but appears in numerous works of early modern Reformed theologians...if God wills something to occur, it will necessarily come to pass; but as pertains to the second cause, or the human agent, events occur contingently and freely... The point, as complex as it might appear, is very simple: God is sovereign and human beings are responsible.”

Fesko: “According to the Confession God does ordain whatsoever comes to pass, but he does so in such a way that he is not the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creature, and contingency and freedom are established. All too often people do not carefully read the Confession’s statement about the decree. Critics, for example, fail to coordinate the Confession’s doctrine of the decree with its affirmations about providence, free will, and contingency. Note how the Confession succinctly [this]: “Although, in relation to the fore-knowledge and decree of God, the first Cause, all things come to passe immutably, and infallibly: yet, by the same Providence, he ordereth them to fall out, according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently” (5.2). Likewise, in its chapter on human free will, the Confession states, “God hath indued the Will of man with that natural liberty, that is neither forced, nor by any absolute necessity of nature determined to good or evil” (9.1). Adam was not forced to sin; he did so freely.”

Fesko: “This point cannot be stressed enough: the divines believed that if human actions were not contingent (that is, freely chosen), then God could in no way hold sinners accountable for their sin. Conversely, if human acts were not truly contingent and free, then there would be no need for the response of faith to the preaching of the gospel... The human will is bound to sin, but our choices are free and not forced upon us. Even though God decrees whatsoever comes to pass, people freely make their own choices. God is not the author of sin and offers no violence to the will of creatures—they freely choose sin. Only through the grace of the gospel does fallen humanity freely choose what is spiritually good, though we are still hampered by the abiding presence of sin. When sinners are converted and ultimately glorified, they are completely freed from sin and immutably able freely to choose good.”

II. Although God knows whatsoever may or can come to pass upon all supposed conditions, (a) yet hath he not decreed anything because he foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions. (b)

a. 1 Sam 23:11-12; Mat 11:21, 23; Acts 15:18. • b. Rom 9:11, 13, 16, 18.

Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*: “Though God knows every possible conditional, every possible ‘if... then’ statement, these conditionals do not influence him. He makes his decisions apart from them. The knowledge of God does not bind him. We serve the God who is entirely free.”

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

a. Mat 25:41; 1 Tim 5:21. • b. Prov 16:4; Rom 9:22-23; Eph 1:5-6.

Van Dixhoorn: “Sometimes we wonder why God destines some for heaven and others for hell. Why do some see God in his mercy and others, ultimately, only in his wrath? We may perhaps never be able to give these questions a sufficient answer... Nonetheless, it is helpful to remember three things.

First, we have all earned the wages of sin and if we have looked unblinkingly at our wicked hearts, we know what should be coming to us on the judgment day. We shall never understand divine punishment until we have an understanding of our own depravity with its wider implications as well as an accurate portrait of the comprehensive purity of God. Few who question God’s decrees have the patience to investigate the character of his holiness or the nature of our sin.

Second, the greatest marvel is not God's judgment, but that at the end of our day we discover that our Master planned in eternity a mercy for us that we do not deserve. Recall the conclusion of one of Jesus' parables, where the owner of the vineyard is criticized for injustice, and he responds with a question that exposes the critics' jealousy of his generosity. Certainly it would not be wrong to put this question in the mouth of God himself: 'Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' (Matt. 20:8; see also Rom. 9:14-15).

Third, we must heed the opening line in the third paragraph of chapter 3 of the confession which reminds us that when God determines the destiny of his creatures he does this, as he does all things, for his own glory, because he is God (Rom. 9:23)."

IV. These angels and men, thus predestinated and fore-ordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed; and their number is so certain and definite that it can not be either increased or diminished. (a)

a. John 13:18; 2 Tim 2:19.

Van Dixhoorn: "It may appear that even these brief statements are leaning towards one side of the story, giving more emphasis to election than reprobation. This is correct. The Westminster assembly selected passages of Scripture to support the theology of these statements, and the emphasis of these passages is on the assurance that God's plan gives to God's people. However, this selection of verses, and this emphasis, are not arbitrary. These verses reflect the dominant emphasis of Scripture itself, which celebrates the selection of God's own people more than his passing by a rebel people whom he does not plan to save. The main point in this section, following a main point of the Bible itself, is that God never sets his love on someone only to abandon him or her later. Our salvation is secure."

V. Those of mankind that are predestinated unto 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, (a) out of his mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving him thereunto; (b) and all to the praise of his glorious grace. (c)

a. Rom 8:30; Eph 1:4, 9, 11; 1 Thes 5:9; 2 Tim 1:9. • b. Rom 9:11, 13, 16; Eph 1:4, 9. • c. Eph 1:6, 12.

Van Dixhoorn: "This counsel is of secret; we cannot penetrate the sovereign pleasure of God in making his decisions, but we trust that it is good...God does choose each one of us, not in a mass, but individually, personally. But God chose all of us as his children *in Christ*—he is the chosen one of God, the foreordained one, and we are saved as we are united to him...All of this flows out of God's sheer, 'free grace,' a grace which is tinged—no, saturated with his love. Of course, the Lord sees all things. But he did not peer into the future in order to find sparks of faith that he could fan into flame. To think that we can do something that will make God then choose us is to construct a facade in the hope that God will add a real structure behind it. He did not predestine us to salvation because he predicted our good works, or knew we would persevere in the Christian life. There is nothing in us that motivated his choice. He set no conditions which he needed to foresee before he would choose us. All such notions need to be deconstructed before we can advance in the school of grace. There was no human cause that set God in motion toward our salvation."

VI. *As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath he, by the eternal and most free purpose of his will, fore-ordained all the means thereunto. (a) Wherefore they who are elected, being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ, (b) are effectually called unto faith in Christ by his Spirit working in due season; are justified, adopted, sanctified, (c) and kept by his power through faith unto salvation. (d) Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only. (e)*

a. Eph 1:4-5; Eph 2:10; 2 Thes 2:13; 1 Pet 1:2. • b. 1 Thes 5:9-10; Titus 2:14. • c. Rom 8:30; Eph 1:5; 2 Thes 2:13. • d. 1 Pet 1:5. • e. John 6:64-65; 8:47; 10:26; 17:9; Rom 8:28-39; 1 John 2:19.

Van Dixhoorn: “When we think of election, we must talk of more than eternal life. We also need to discuss the way to life, because we shall not reach the end of our journey any way we please... We are chosen and predestined, Paul says, but this election will be tethered to a life of good works and increasing holiness within the context of our life in the family of God (Eph. 1:4-5; 2:10). God decides to save and sanctify us, but not without suffering and learning, not without preaching and prayer.”

VII. *The rest of mankind God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of his own will, whereby he extendeth or withholdeth mercy as he pleaseth, for the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, to pass by, and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin, to the praise of his glorious justice. (a)*

a. Mat 11:25-26; Rom 9:17-18, 21-22; 2 Tim 2:19-20; 1 Pet 2:8; Jude 1:4.

Fesko: “The point the divines implicitly make with such a distinction, namely, the predestination of the elect and the preterition of the non-elect, is that God does not treat both groups in the same way. God positively and actively brings about the salvation of the elect, but he does not positively and actively bring about the reprobation of the non-elect. To do this would make God the author of sin, something the Confession 3.1 explicitly denies.”

Fesko: “For...the Confession, preterition was an absolute decree to pass by the non-elect; but considered relatively, or contingently, damnation was the result of the person’s freely chosen path of sin.”

VIII. *The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care, (a) that men attending the will of God revealed in his Word, and yielding obedience thereunto, may, from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election. (b) So shall this doctrine afford matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God; (c) and of humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all that sincerely obey the gospel. (d)*

a. Deut 29:29; Rom 9:20. • b. 2 Pet 1:10. • c. Rom 11:33; Eph 1:6. • d. Luke 10:20; Rom 8:33; 11:5-6, 20; 2 Pet 1:10.

Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*: “This mystery [of predestination] is to be handled with great care. The aim of ministers of the gospel should be to proclaim so as to encourage assurance of salvation in the elect, so as to bring praise to God and humility to those who obey the gospel.”

J. V. Fesko: “Though many of the issues related to the decree, election, preterition, and human freedom are complex, the Confession breathes the air of a streamlined simplicity. In one sense, the ease with which the Confession states these issues is but the tip of the iceberg; many complex matters lie beneath the dark surface of the waters. Nevertheless, such is the nature of a confession of faith—it pins down key affirmations, denies false teachings, and does so in such a way that allows room for disagreement on some of the particular points of doctrine.”