

Lesson 6: 2LCF Chapter 3: Of God's Decrees

Paragraphs 1-2

*"declaring the end from the beginning
and from ancient times things not yet done,
saying, 'My counsel shall stand,
and I will accomplish all my purpose...'"*
Isaiah 46:10

After addressing the weighty matters of the doctrine of God, the 2LCF moves to the wise will and works of God in His decrees.

But, before we get any further, it may be helpful to ask and answer the question: What are decrees?

Decrees Defined:

William Ames defines God's decrees in this way: "The decree of God is His determinate purpose of effecting all things by His almighty power and according to His counsel."⁵³

Herman Bavinck describes God's divine decrees with these words:

The counsel of God is to be understood as his eternal plan for all that exists or will happen in time. Scripture everywhere assumes that all that is and comes to pass is the realization of God's thought and will and has its model and foundation in God's eternal counsel (Gen. 1; Job 28:27; Prov. 8:22; Ps. 104:24; Prov. 3:19; Jer. 10:12; 51:15; Heb. 11:3; Ps. 33:11; Isa. 14:24-27; 46:10; Prov. 19:21; Acts 2:23; 4:28; Eph. 1:11; etc.).⁵⁴

Question 10 of the Baptist Catechism also provides a simple and helpful definition of the decrees of God:

Question 10

Q. What are the decrees of God?

A. The decrees of God are his eternal purpose according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass.

When rightly understood, the doctrine of God's decrees proves to be a source of tremendous comfort and assurance for Christians living in a world seemingly filled with chaos and disorder. As we will see in this lesson, the living and true God is on His throne in heaven, doing all that He pleases (Ps. 115:3)! Everything that comes to pass is by His sovereign ordination. Neither men, nor devils can thwart His eternal purposes.

It should be a tremendous comfort to the Christian that our God is not only all-good, but He is all-sovereign.

⁵³ William Ames, *The Marrow of Sacred Divinity*. (London: Published by The Honourable House of Commons, 1639), 22.

⁵⁴ Herman Bavinck, John Bolt, and John Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2003), 372.

In the 2LCF, the doctrine of God's decrees is spelled out in seven paragraphs that move from general to specific in their focus. The following outline for chapter 3 of the confession has been offered:⁵⁵

Paragraphs 1-2

- I. The general decree of all events
 - A. Its universality
 - B. Its unconditionality

Paragraphs 3-7

- II. The specific decree of Predestination to life
 - A. Its major attributes
 - B. Its positive outworking: election of those predestinated
 - C. Its prudent handling

In this lesson, we will look at the first two paragraphs.

Paragraph 1.

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 comes to pass; yet so as thereby is God neither the author of sin nor hath fellowship with any therein; 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; in which appears His wisdom in disposing all things, and power and faithfulness in accomplishing His decree.

Exposition

"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 comes to pass..."

Paragraph 1 deals with the universality of God's decrees and asserts that God's decrees are unfrustratable, unescapable, and unconditional. This means that God's "decretive will," sometimes referred to as his "secret" or "sovereign" will cannot be resisted, but is perfectly accomplished.⁵⁶ This is taught in many places in Scripture, such as:

Isaiah 46: 8-10

⁸ "Remember this and stand firm, recall it to mind, you transgressors, ⁹ remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, ¹⁰ declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,'

Proverbs 19:21

²¹ Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is *the purpose of the Lord that will stand*.

Romans 9:18-21

¹⁸ So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills. ¹⁹ You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? *For who can resist his will?*" ²⁰ But who are you, O man, to

⁵⁵ Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 5th ed. (Welwyn Garden City, UK: EP Books, 2016), 73-74.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?"

²¹ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?

Daniel 4:34-35

...for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; ³⁵ all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and *none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?"*

Ephesians 1:11

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...*

Waldron points out that these decrees are not limited merely to acts of salvation, but all acts under the sun:⁵⁷

- 1) Sinful acts (Gen. 50:20; 2 Sam. 16:10; 11; 24:1 with 1 Chron. 21:1; Job 1:11, 12, 21; Luke 22:22; Acts 2:23; 4:27, 28.)
- 2) Good and evil events (Isa. 45:7; Amos 3:6; Job 1:21; Jer. 15:2).
- 3) Free acts of men (Prov. 16:1, 9; 21:1; Rom. 8:28, 35-39.)
- 4) "Chance" occurrences (1 Kings 22:28-34; Job 5:6; 36:32; Prov. 16:33; John 1:7).
- 5) Details of our lives (Job 14:5; Psalm 139:16; Matt. 10:29, 30; James 4:15).
- 6) Affairs of the nations (2 Kings 5:1; Psalm 75:1-7; Prov. 21:31; Dan. 2:21).
- 7) Final destruction of the wicked (1 Sam. 2:25; Prov. 16:4; Rom. 9:17; 1 Pet. 2:8; Jude 4).

The second half of paragraph 1 states:

"... yet so as thereby is God neither the author of sin nor hath fellowship with any therein; 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; in which appears His wisdom in disposing all things, and power and faithfulness in accomplishing His decree."

This statement teaches the doctrine of "secondary causes" that is often referred to by theologians as "concurrency." R.C. Sproul helpfully defines "concurrency" as, "the actions of two or more parties taking place at the same time."⁵⁸

Sam Waldron elaborates further:

Does this not make God the author of sin? If it does not, then on what basis does the Confession assert that though God ordains all things, yet he is not the author of sin?

Even though the Confession teaches that God decrees sin, it denies that God is the author of sin. This denial is to be justified on the basis of 'the liberty or contingency of second causes' mentioned in paragraph I. God is not the author of sin because he does not by his own immediate causation bring it to pass. It is the responsibility of the second causes who willingly engage in it. This is illustrated by the case of God's decreeing that David should sinfully number Israel (2 Samuel 24:1; 1 Chronicles 21:1). From the latter passage we learn that this decree was not carried out by the Holy Spirit moving David, but by Satan. Another

⁵⁷ Ibid., 75.

⁵⁸ R. C. Sproul, *Does God Control Everything?*, First edition, vol. 14, The Crucial Questions Series (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2012), 56.

thought which helps to alleviate this problem may be gleaned from the passages which speak of God's decree of sinful actions (Genesis 50:20; 2 Samuel 24:1; Acts 2:23). In each of these passages it is clear that God's rationale in decreeing the sin was completely pure. In the first and third his motive is graciously redemptive. In the second it is justly retributive.⁵⁹

Waldron continues:

Williamson provides a biblical definition of the liberty of "second causes" consistent with its use by the Confession: Freedom may be defined as "the absence of external coercion". If a man is not forced by any power outside himself to do that which is contrary to "what he wants to do", then we may properly say that he is "free". The wonder of God's predestination is that God does leave men free in this sense, even though he predestines everything that every man will ever do?⁶⁰

When we recognize the clear teaching of Scripture on this point, we must confess with Louis Berkhof: "God causes everything in nature to work and to move in the direction of a predetermined end."⁶¹

Paragraph 2.

Although God knoweth 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.

Exposition

Paragraph 2 teaches that God's decrees are not conditioned by his divine foreknowledge, but by his powerful decrees.

Waldron comments:

It is not speculative to raise here this question: 'Can God foresee that something will happen, before he decrees that it shall happen?' The straightforward answer to this question is 'No!' Only that which is certain to happen may be foreseen or foreknown. To foresee something is to be certain that it will happen. Since, however, it is God's decree that makes certain all that shall occur, nothing can be foreseen as certain to happen unless God has decreed that it shall.

The idea that one may escape the problems associated with the divine decree by having recourse to divine foreknowledge is groundless. Foreknowledge assumes that some future event is certain to happen. The question remains: 'What made that event certain to happen?' The only possible answer is God's decree.

In the Bible prophecies and predictions of future events are not viewed as based merely on divine foreknowledge, but as based on divine decree (Isaiah 46:10; Acts 3:18;

⁵⁹ Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 5th ed. (Welwyn Garden City, UK: EP Books, 2016), 78-79.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 79.

⁶¹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1938), 173.

4:27-28;15:15-18). Scripture prophecy is, therefore, viewed as, so to speak, the transcript not of what God foresees, but of what God decrees (Matthew 26:54; Luke 22:37; John 13:18; 19:24, 34-36; Acts 1:16; 2:24-31; 13:34, 35).⁶²

“The eternal decree is accomplished in the created realm. Everything that happens external to God is the realization of His holy will. It is not simply a general decree, stating, for example, that each autumn leaves will fall from trees, but rather a very specific decree. It teaches that each leaf will turn a certain shade, will fall at a certain time into a certain place, will be blown by the wind, and will decay in the way that God sets out for its end. There are no contingencies or variables. God rules over all. He freely and unchangeably has decreed all things.”⁶³

Application

1) Comfort

“No event is meaningless in or devoid of playing a part in the outworking of a larger, even glorious goal. Even mankind’s most urgent need, his redemption, is the the result of God’s own plan, or, His decree. Here we are confronted with a choice: embrace the darkness and despair of nihilism or enjoy life with all of its promises and challenges as we await the great day of consummation.”⁶⁴

I once heard John Piper tell a story about a missionary family and their experience of the decrees and providence of God in their lives. Rather than seeing their plight as a meaningless experience outside of God’s control, they took great comfort in God’s sovereignty over all things.

In 2001, Jim and Veronica Bowers were a missionary couple who were serving in Peru, along with their two children, Charity (7 months) and Cory (6 years). One day, as they were flying in a Cessna 185 float plane, while carrying out their missionary activities, a Peruvian Air Force plane mistook theirs for a drug plane and opened fire on them. 35-year-old Veronica, was holding Charity in her lap, seated just behind the plane’s pilot, Kevin Donaldson. Jim and their six-year-old son, Cory, were seated on the co-pilot side. As bullets pierced through the plane, the pilot’s legs were badly injured by the gun-fire. One bullet passed by Jim’s head and made a hole in the windshield in front of him. And a final bullet passed through Veronica’s back and into seven-month-old Charity, where it stopped, killing them both. The plane crash landed on a river below them and within a few minutes of landing, sunk to the bottom of the river.

Two weeks later Jim Bowers stood in front of twelve hundred people in Calvary Church of Fruitport, Michigan and thanked all in attendance. And, as he gave thanks, he remarked, “Most of all I want to thank my God. He’s a sovereign God. I’m finding that out more now. . . . Could this really be God’s plan for Roni and Charity; God’s plan for Cory and me and our family? I’d like to tell you why I believe so, why I’m coming to believe so.”

⁶² Ibid., 80.

⁶³ James M. Renihan, *To the Judicious and Impartial Reader: A Contextual-Historical Exposition of the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith*, Baptist Symbolics 2 (Cape Coral: Founders Press, 2022), 108.

⁶⁴ David Charles, “Chapter Three: Of God’s Decrees,” in *A New Exposition of the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, ed. Rob Ventura (Ross-shire: Mentor, 2022), 88.

Bowers then went into some detail and gave a long list the events in and after the shooting. He then said, “Roni and Charity were instantly killed by the same bullet. And it didn’t reach Kevin who was right in front of Charity; it stayed in Charity. That was a sovereign bullet. . . .”

2) Confidence

John Flavel seeks to embolden the believer with this truth: “Is the Lord not an overmatch of all His enemies? Is not one Almighty more than many mighties? Does His presence stand for nothing with is? If God be for us, who can be against us?”⁶⁵

*“His decree determines what shall be done...
for there is nothing higher than His will.”*

William Perkins⁶⁶

⁶⁵ John Flavel, *Saint Indeed*, 104.

⁶⁶ William Perkins, *The Workes of That Famous and Worthy Minister of Christ in the Universitie of Cambridge, Mr. William Perkins* (London: John Legatt, 1612-13), 1:723.