

## The Decrees of God

by Samuel Willard and modernised by William Carson

What are the decrees of God? Answer: The decrees of God are His eternal purpose, according to the counsel of His will, whereby, for His own glory, he hath fore-ordained whatsoever comes to pass.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism began with a description of God's being all-in-all from the point of view of His being and person. Now it continues with a consideration of His working all-in-all, and for introductory purposes begins with this question of the doctrine of the decree. This is indeed the true and proper place to put this doctrine in relation to the others because of our conception of God as a rational, intelligent being who is a wise builder, who has an idea of His works before He does them. It is clear that God works in time and therefore we suppose that He intended to do so before time.

Our catechism uses the plural word "decrees" for this act of God, not referring to multiple acts of decreeing, as we shall see, but referring to the multitude of things God decreed. We will now consider the evidence that there is such a decree, and then look into the nature of it according to the light that God has given us from the Bible.

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- First, that there is a divine decree. This can be seen from two evidences:

1. We can see that God has worked. If God has done any things in the world, then there must be a decree for the doing of them. It is proper for us to believe that God works according to a plan, because we conceive of God doing things deliberately. Rash and arbitrary actions are defects, not virtues of rational beings, and we know there are no defects in God. Therefore we believe that everything God does, he planned to do; otherwise we would deny His infinite wisdom. This is why the Bible says, Eph 1:11 "...him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will."

2. We know that God is omnipotent. The works of God are not forced upon Him or required in any way. He was not under any coercion to create the world: he did it according to His good pleasure, Rev 4:11 "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being." Furthermore, He is able to do any powerful work He may desire, and the creation of the world did not overtax Him. Why, then, is there a difference between the possible things, which will never actually come into being, and those future things, that will in time come into existence? Only the will of God.

- Second, the nature of the decree. We will explain this as follows:

In general, the decree is God's eternal purpose. Usually we define purpose as a fixed, resolved determination concerning something. It may be said to stand firm, Psalm 119:89 "Your word, O LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens." God knows His own thoughts, Jer 29:11 "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD."

God's decree is said to be eternal. We think of God's acts in two categories: immanent, or coming from God's being, and temporal, only appearing for a time. The decree must be in the first category because it has to be eternal. God was never without His intention, which is why it is said to stand firm, Psalm 119:89 "Your word, O LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens." Otherwise there would be change in God, which is contrary to His nature, Mal 3:6 "I the LORD do not change."

- In particular we may identify various aspects of the decree:

1. The subject of the decree, or what is decreed. The catechism gives the answer, "whatsoever comes to pass", that is to say everything that happens in the world. The Bible is clear, that the decree involves all things, and extends to all events, Eph 1:11 "...according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will." The decree reaches to sparrows, Matt 10:29, to gourds and worms, Jonah 4. In the same way that it doesn't neglect the little things, it orders the greatest, such as all changes in kingdoms and States, Dan. 4.32. Even the most random of events are ordered by the decree, Prov 16:33 "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD." Even the arbitrary contingent acts of rational beings are decreed, Acts 2:23 "This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross."

2. The influence that the decree has on its subjects. The decree fore-ordains them, or predetermines them. There is a vast multitude of possible things in the knowledge or understanding of God. The decree appoints which of them will come into existence and pass from possibility into actuality. The decree appoints not only that they will exist, but also when and how they will come into being. Therefore we see, as in Acts 2:23 as above, or Acts 4:27,28 "Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen." This appointing is a firm and unchangeable determination on the part of God. Therefore in the working of these acts we can see the unchanging nature of God. In everything he does He stands by His decree, Num 23:19 "God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfil?" Prov 19:21 "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails." (Other Scriptures are Rom 11:29 and Psalm 102:27.)

3. The freedom or liberty which God had in making this decree. He did it "in conformity with the purpose of his will," Eph 1:11. Here we see two perfections of God, His plan and His good pleasure.

God's infinite wisdom may be seen in His plan. In our minds, a plan is necessary to any sort of decree, human or divine. The Bible plainly shows us that God works according to a plan. We can describe His plan in this way: it is His eternal deliberation with Himself, concerning the best way to accomplish His own purposes.

It is a deliberation. When men speak of discussing matters, we speak of deliberation. Although God knew all things from eternity past, and knew at the beginning what was best, nevertheless we see God deliberating at the very creation of man, Gen 1:26 "Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness..."

It is an eternal deliberation, because God's decrees are projects begun in eternity, Acts 15:17,18 "...the Lord, who does these things that have been known for ages." 1 Cor 2:7 "No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began." These deliberations took place before time came into existence.

It is a deliberation with Himself. In that eternity past there was no other person to consult with except Himself. Nor did He need anyone else to consult with, because he had the sum total of all wisdom in Himself. All secondary beings were to be the result of this plan and therefore none of them could participate in it.

It was the best way to accomplish His purposes. In every plan there is a purpose implied and also a question: what is the best way to achieve the purpose? The idea of a plan is to be concerned about the means so as to accomplish the end, or goal, of those means. God has many ways that He might use to achieve His ends but His wisdom determined the best way to accomplish them.

In this deliberation, God arranged in His mind an eternal idea of all things that are to exist. Then, conceiving of His work in the creation and governing of the world, God laid out a scheme of it in His infinite understanding. This idea must be eternal, because time is included in those things "...that have been known for ages." (Acts 15:18). There is a vast depth of wisdom in His plan, Rom 11:33 "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!" God has a double knowledge from our point of view. He knows His own power in Himself (what He can do), and all possible beings. God also knows His decree by which He knows all future things, which the Bible calls His foreknowledge, Rom 8:29 "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son." All of this was according to God's idea.

In men, the things in the physical universe are but an idea, and our knowledge is nothing but an image corresponding to actual things. However, God's knowledge is the idea, and the physical things are the image, because they were first in God's mind before they ever had corporeal

existence. Now this idea is a single thing in God, not many things, because with one perfect and eternal view He clearly sees everything that is to be. They all stand before Him at once, because just as God can see Himself He sees all things.

People see everything from a different perspective, and see different things. This is the reason why the Bible refers to the one decree of God as the "manifold wisdom of God," (Eph 3:10). It not only extends to the kinds and natures of things, but to every one of each kind, and every action and change that belongs to it. God's decree counts not only every drop of rain that will fall, but where and when it will fall as well. It includes every thought that comes to the mind of every creature, and nothing is too small to escape it, Psalm 139:2,3 "You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways."

The other perfection of God that we see in His decree is His good pleasure. Although a plan is involved in the preparation of a decree, it is the will that fixes it. The authority that signs and seals a decree is what makes it valid. For this reason, God's decree may be further described as an act of God's will, most freely and effectively determined in Himself, concerning the working of all things. The Bible shows us these things about God's effective will:

- Qualities of the Will of God

1. This will of God is most free and sovereign. God acted in His decree with the greatest freedom. He was not coerced for there is no dependence of the Creator upon His creation. God could do just as well without the things that exist as well as without those possible things that will never be. If God had never willed the creation to exist, he would not have injured it. He is not obliged to anyone outside of Himself, Rom 11:34,35 "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?" Besides, if God had not been free, He would not have had any deliberation, since coercion eliminates any need for deliberation.

2. This will of God is most effective. In a certain sense this decree is the cause of things happening, Psalm 135:6 "The LORD does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths." His will brings all things ordained by Him into actual existence at the right time without fail. His creative will merely says, "Let it be" and it is, as in the first chapter of Genesis.

3. Therefore this will of God is the first cause of all things. If we seek out the reason why things are, back to the original cause, we must find it in the decree, and determined by God's will. There may be many instrumental and intermediate causes willed by God to carry out His decree, but the ultimate cause of all is that decree. This may be seen in the creation, Rev 4:11 "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being." This is the reason for the new birth, James 1:18 "He chose to give us birth through the word of truth..." This may be seen in the application of His mercy, Rom 9:18 "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have

mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden." God is not motivated by something he sees ahead of time in the creature.

4. Therefore the will of God is without a cause, that is to say, any cause outside of God Himself. Nothing outside of God can determine His will because nothing is greater than God, or before Him, or beyond Him. Matt 11:25,26 "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure." Sometimes God may reveal to us His will for a particular thing and sometimes we can see that He created one thing for a purpose with regard to another. But if we ask what disposed God's will to create the universe? We must answer, because it was His will to do so.

5. This will makes the divine decree unalterable. He is an unchangeable God who sees that all things happen just as He determined, Job 23:13 "But he stands alone, and who can oppose him? He does whatever he pleases." God's will cannot and will not be frustrated. If any act has been passed by the divine Legislature, so to speak, it stands ratified and will be enforced. Isa 43:13 "Yes, and from ancient days I am he. No one can deliver out of my hand. When I act, who can reverse it?"

6. Nevertheless this will of God does not lay any coercion on the creature, but only a certainty as to the outcome. Everything will happen as God's will has determined, but the freedom of people to choose their actions is not infringed. Indeed, the freedom of moral agents is ratified, because in His will he has determined that free agents will act freely. For example, in God's will it was impossible for the soldiers to break Christ's bones. But no coercion was laid upon them: they were free agents, who freely chose not to break them.

- The Purpose of the Decree

This brings us to the great and ultimate purpose of the decree: the glory of God. Every wise person has a purpose for his labours, and that goal is in mind when he lays out his work. Otherwise how would anybody do his work properly? In all we do, we arrange the means we use, to be suitable to the ends we have in mind. Now in the universe as a whole there are many subordinate purposes for the things God created, as they all work together. But each and every one of all the many things God created, He made for Himself, Prov 16:4 "The LORD works out everything for his own ends-- even the wicked for a day of disaster." If this is so, then God planned it this way, because God is the Greatest Worker and He must achieve His own best goal, His own glory. To this end, all other ends are but means: this is the target at which all God's plans aim. Eph 1:5,6 "he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will-- to the praise of his glorious grace..."

- Application 1. INFORMATION. Learn from the doctrine of God's decrees,

1. That there are no random events with respect to God. To us it is true that time and chance influence all things. Things come to pass in unseen ways, and by unknown means, but with

respect to God it is not so. Nothing can happen either outside His knowledge or intention, for it is His decree that gives being to all events. The things that are, would never be if He had not intended them. For example, Joseph's going down to Egypt would not have happened if God had not foreordained it, Gen 45:5,7 "And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you... But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance."

2. That all things that come to pass are the product of infinite wisdom. God does all things, and he does them according to His plan. We are ready to find some flaw in God's providence and think we could mend many things. But remember, all things are ordered by the plan, not of men or angels, but of God, who does nothing rashly. The highest and most dreadful wheels are full of eyes (Ezek. 1:18). From the creature's point of view, some things might have been better, Matt. 26:24 "The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born." But from the point of view of the great Purpose which swallows up everything else, that is to say, the Glory of God, all is best. If we do not see it this way, it is our own ignorance at work.

3. That no decrees of God can be unrighteous, but all are just and holy. His sacred and divine will which is the rule of the decree is also the rule of all things. He who wills things because they seem good in His sight, He who is not accountable to any man, He whose will is supreme and holy, cannot do wrong. It is therefore impudent boldness for us to find fault with Him.

- Application 2. Let the doctrine of the decree TEACH US these practical lessons:

1. To see our nothingness without God. Apart from Him we are nothing. It was His decree that gave us our being. He counts us for nothing, Isa 40:15,17 "Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales; he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust... Before him all the nations are as nothing; they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing." Let us count ourselves likewise. As creatures we are the mere effects of His good pleasure. When we are lifted up in ourselves, let us look on the possible beings, which shall never be, and remember it is the decree that made all the difference between us and them. We came from nothing, and would be nothing still, except for this.

2. To adore the wisdom of God in all things that happen in this world, and that happen to us in particular. We are apt to complain, but remember: God's infinite plan ordered them. That satisfied Job, Job 23:14 "He carries out his decree against me, and many such plans he still has in store." The reason we do not see the wisdom of them is partly because being creatures we cannot fathom the wisdom of the Creator, and as sinful creatures we are blind and prejudiced. It is also partly because we forget the purpose they ultimately aim toward, and measure them by our own standards. It is also partly through our own pride, because we have such a high opinion of our own wisdom, which is foolishness indeed.

3. To sanctify God in all the changes of our lives. Let us for this reason acknowledge His hand in everything. We must not ascribe them to chance as if they just happened apart from the intention of the First Cause, which is a blasphemy against providence. We must not concentrate our thoughts too much on the instruments, either in good or evil events, forgetting their absolute dependence on the First Cause. Acknowledge His hand in the sending and disposing of all things. Let us recognize His sovereign prerogative to order all as He sees fit; that He is Lord and has the right to determine all things according to His pleasure. Therefore learn quietly to submit to the all-controlling hand of God. Let this silence us in all things: It is the Lord's will (Psalm 39:9).

4. To commend all the things in our lives to Him: not anxiously fearing what may come to pass, but believing all shall be as He has in wisdom appointed.

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