



## God's way of working

From a consideration of the being and nature of God, the Confession moves on to deal with the subject of God's method of operation and of working. The third chapter of the Confession therefore is entitled, "Of God's eternal decree".

Robert Shaw, in his exposition of the Confession of Faith, describes this particular subject as "*one of the most abstruse and intricate in theology, and it has been the fruitful source of a variety of controversies in the Christian church*". No-one would argue with him there. The doctrine of God's foreordination of all things has always been open to misunderstanding and mishandling; yet the very doctrines that seem most abstruse and that harden some against the gospel, are the very doctrines which are full of comfort for the people of God. The fault, as is so often the case, lies not with the doctrine but with the expression and explanation of it.

There is an interesting discrepancy in the Westminster documents themselves at this particular point. While this chapter speaks of God's eternal *decree* (singular), the Shorter Catechism speaks of God's *decrees* (plural) as "*his eternal purpose, according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass*" (Q.7). The Larger Catechism also speaks of God's *decrees* (plural) as "*the wise, free and holy acts of the counsel of his will*" (Q.12), and goes on to speak of one eternal and Immutable decree of election (Q.13).

The balance of singularity and Plurality maintained in the Westminster documents reminds us of the limitations of our human language to express revealed truth. God, the Confession is at pains to emphasise, has one purpose, one plan. There is a singular divine counsel, according to Ephesians 1:9-11, by which God works all things.

From our side of it, however, each individual event that occurs in our observable and measurable world, open to verification and analysis, can properly be spoken of as having been planned and purposed and even decreed by God. He is the God of the universal, and the God of the particular. Without the latter there could be little comfort for the individual believer in the exigencies of his own life; without the former we could never know that all things work together for God's glory and our good.

At the same time, we must guard against the misconception that God is time-bound as we are. The Confession speaks of God's having decreed *from all eternity* and of his having foreseen all future events. But to God one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. He sees the end from the beginning only because all things are naked and opened to His eye as He dwells in one continuous present. Calvin, in one place, defines God's foreknowledge as His "*immediate inspection*" of all things. It is not that the events of our lives are seen by Him at a distance, but are immediately known to Him, and decreed by Him.

### **What is a decree?**

The Confession, by employing the language of "ordination" and "decreeing" is bringing a personal note into the affairs and experiences of life. It is reminding us that things do not merely occur or happen, but that behind them is a personal thinking, planning, purposing God. Without such a concept the world is a black hole, void of comfort, hope and blessing. But for the child of God there is rule over life on the part of the one who was afflicted in the afflictions of his people, and who is still touched with a feeling of our infirmities.

It is also using the language of *sovereignty*. It belongs to a king to issue decrees, with the expectation of obedience and fulfillment. God, as Daniel 4:35 reminds us, acts "*according to his will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, 'What doest thou?'*" All of heaven's creatures, and all of earth's inhabitants, are subject to the throne that is high and lifted up.

Thirdly, the Confession is using the language of *determination*. It is going beyond the thought of God establishing the *possibility* of things occurring, and beyond the mere *permission* of events. The Confession roots the events of life and the affairs of this world firmly within the determinative and regulative will of God.

### **What kind of decree?**

The Confession uses four adjectives to describe the counsel of God's will by which all things are ordained. These adjectives have already been employed by the Confession to describe God Himself (in Chapter 2). As He is, so His works are. God stamps, as it were, His very nature on the works that He executes and carries into fulfillment.

The first word to describe God's method of working is the word *wise*. Wisdom belongs to God and is written over all his works. Twice the New Testament refers to God as "*the only wise God*" (2 Timothy 1:17; Jude 25). There is no foolishness in any of God's actions, nor in any of God's plans. All that he ordains he does so in and with perfect wisdom. That means not only that He determines that certain events will take place, but that they will take place under certain conditions, better than which nothing could have been conceived. The determining plan of God fulfills the greatest and best of all possible ends, because there is not a bare ordaining or decreeing of them, but a wise ordaining.

This is what registers in the mind of the apostle when he speaks of the death of Christ and says that "*the foolishness of God is wiser than men*" (1 Corinthians 1:25). Questions which arise in our providences and experiences regarding what God is doing and why God is doing it are resolved in the knowledge that His way is always best. No human mind could ever have planned the world and its courses as God has done.

*"Great is the Lord and of great power - His wisdom search can none."*

(Psalm 147:5)

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