

Alternatives/Objections to Decrees



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Let us pray. Our gracious God, our Father, we rejoice in the good news of salvation which the gospel brings to us. We pray that we may be careful to give you the glory for all that you have done to rescue us from our condition of sin and misery. And grant, we pray, that in our gratitude we may serve you with joy all the days of our life. We ask this in the name of Christ, our Lord. Amen.

In discussing the terms relating to the subject of election, we still need to mention the word “the good pleasure,” in Greek, *eudokia*, which emphasizes that there is no compulsion upon a person but one acts in accordance with one’s own desires, and this is applied to God who was pleased to bring to salvation some people who are mentioned, for instance, in Ephesians 1. Similarly, the word *thelema*, the will, is used at times in Scripture emphasizing that it is God’s will that regulates whatever happens.

In discussing the subject of election, we recognize that there are different points of view which are present within the evangelical community. The speaker happens to be Reformed in his outlook, and it is this position that I would like in the main to present, but it must be understood that there is no compulsion here for those who study the matter to accept the point of view of the speaker. What is in view is to be confronted with the issues that are present in this difficult subject, and then each person who listens to the record will consider what conclusions he or she may reach in accordance with his or her understanding of Scripture.

The Reformed position is very plainly set out in a number of Reformed confessions, particularly the Confession of Faith of the Westminster Assembly. Chapter 3 of that confession is devoted to the subject of God’s eternal decrees, and it begins in the very first paragraph with a rather solemn statement which runs as follows: “God, from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is

violence offered to the will of the creature, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.” And again paragraph 2, “Although God knows whatsoever may or can come to pass upon all supposed conditions, yet He has not decreed anything because He foresaw it as future or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions.”

This particular paragraph needs to be amplified somewhat so as to achieve an understanding of the subject of election, and here it is made plain that there are six characteristics of the decree of God which need to be observed. First of all it is an eternal decree. That is, God is not improvising action as history rolls along, but everything that occurs is part of His own plan set up in eternity, so that there is no possibility of having a change of it at a later point.

In the second place the decree is represented as wise. That is, everything that God has decided is in line with His own supreme wisdom. Sometimes the wisdom of certain decisions of God is not immediately apparent to us, even as the wisdom of good parents is not always apparent to the children when they have to live under the rule of the home, and yet wise parents do have decisions and regulations which enhance the life of the children, and similarly God Himself in His own plan has determined everything according to His wisdom, whether we see it or not.

In the third place, the decree is presented as holy. That is, there is no besmirching of the holiness of God because of the reality of sin in the universe. In discussing the doctrine of sin in the same series, we have made the comment that we do not understand how sin originated, for surely it does not originate with God, but God has been pleased to include it in the plan that He has made for the universe, and in doing so, He has not declared Himself as responsible for the sinfulness of anything that occurs. We will see in a moment that negatively the Westminster Divines were careful to protect the holiness of God against aspersions that could easily arise in the mind in connection with this feature.

In the fourth place, the decree is presented as free. That is, there was no compulsion placed upon God by any outside force that obliged Him to take decisions as He did, but everything that He decided is freely ordained in terms of His own excellence without any kind of pressure or compulsion from the outside.

In the fifth place, the decree is immutable. That is, there is no change that can or should occur in anything that God has decided to do. When we deal with situations, we need, at times, to revise our decisions and to opt for a better course of action than what we had planned. This comes from the fact that our knowledge is limited, and sometimes in the presence of the circumstances of life we are led to adopt another course which appears to us wiser than what we had originally planned. There can be no such thing with God because His omniscience comprehends all things, and therefore there is no need at any point for God to modify His decision and take a different course of action than what He had originally planned. One could put it in those terms that God's pencil does not have any erasers. He need not to correct anything as the execution of His decrees comes along.

And the final characteristic that is mentioned is that the decree of God is comprehensive. It encompasses all events. For us, we think that if a person has tremendous responsibilities, it is not wise for that person to be confused or enmeshed in the handling of all kinds of small details, but this conception should not be applied to God. The greatness of God permits Him, in fact, to take account of every detail, and the importance of the decision that He has taken does not demand that He should bypass certain minor issues as being peripheral and therefore of no great importance. One could say in truth that God keeps an exact account of every atom in the whole universe and that there is no limit to the extent to which His regulative power is exercised.

Now, it is important to note that immediately after having made the statement concerning the decree of God in a positive manner, the Westminster Confession proceeds to set aside four approaches which might be conceived to be involved in the doctrine of the decrees of God, but which would in fact be misconceptions and very nefarious at that. The first is that God is presented here as the author of sin. It says, "Yet, thereby, neither is God the author of sin." Indeed, sin does not have God as its immediate cause. It is true that God has included the reality of sin in the totality of His plan, but the origin of sin, the sinfulness of sin, is not a result of God's own action or decision. This is something which leaves us baffled in terms of finite logic, and we do recognize that wherever we deal with the problem of sin, we have some elements which are seared and which introduce some difficulty in all our equations.

The Reformed representatives who were present at the Synod of Dort in 1618 and 1619 and who deliberated on this important issue went so far as to say that the very thought that God should be the author of sin is blasphemy. They did not mean that the people who opposed their view were blaspheming because they saw or thought that the view that God is the author of sin was a necessary conclusion from the Reformed doctrine of election, but they held that anyone who seriously considered that God could be the author of sin was by that fact besmirching the holiness of God and therefore blaspheming.

A second caution which the Westminster Divines immediately introduced is that the decree of God does not offer violence to the will of the creature. Some people hold that if God has decreed everything, there is no room left for the reality of free agency, free will, or responsible decision. This implication also is rejected. In fact, it is because God has decreed that the actions of free agents would come as a result of their own decisions that there are free actions in the universe, and so the decree of God does not eliminate the reality of human decisions; rather it posits them as responsibly made, and therefore accountability before God is a result of the condition which God Himself has created and by which rational creatures have the power to take decisions in view of motives for which thereafter they are responsible before God.

In the third place, the Westminster Divines were eager to emphasize that second causes are not eliminated but are consistent with the doctrine of the decrees. A second cause is an intermediate, whereby one who is seen as the prime mover employs another element in order to secure the end that he has in view. . . . In the game of tennis, if I pick a racket and hit the ball with it, the racket may be called a second cause in terms of the game of tennis. The first cause will be my mind, which desires to send the ball in a particular direction. The various organs that are put into play in my body may be seen as second causes. The racket is a second cause, and in understanding the subject of God's sovereign determination, we need to understand that God does not function by an immediate intervention in every case but that there is a whole gamut of causes and effects which are involved in the plan that He has made.

One, therefore, cannot make abstraction of the second causes that God has ordained as if they were unnecessary for the fulfillment of what God intends. This is a mistake that is often made in the understanding of the doctrine of decrees. Some people say, "If God

has decreed everything, I don't need to make any special effort in any direction since the end is already established by the decision of God," but precisely God has determined that the ends in view will take place through second causes. Thus the education of children will demand the diligence of their parents. The safeguard of the home will come in through the mutual love of the spouses. The feeding of our body comes in through food and drink that we ingest at a regular time. The continuation of our lives comes in by the process of respiration in which we absorb oxygen and remove carbon dioxide that would be noxious to the body.

The purpose of God, therefore, ought not to be seen as a series of single decisions without relationship with each other, but it ought to be seen as a tapestry in which everything in some very real way depends on everything else, and it is in this manner that God has planned to accomplish His one purpose.

In the second paragraph that I read a moment ago, the Westminster Divines further articulate that the ground of God's decision is not a foresight of what free agents might be doing. In dealing with this issue, they particularly seek to distance themselves from Arminians who thought that in order to maintain the reality of free decision in humanity, it was necessary to imply that they were not originally made by God, but that they were decisions in which God had made no pressure at all in relationship to what free agents would accomplish.

Then the formulation of God's plan was made in the light of what free agents would decide. In other words, the priority would be with free agents. God established from eternity and took account of the decision of free agents because precisely He foresaw what they would decide, and therefore their decision remains ultimate, and it is for this reason that they are responsible. The Westminster Divines were eager to oppose this particular conception, saying that the decision of God is ultimate and the decision of free agents remains a decision in view of motives for which they are accountable, but it is not because God foresaw what they would decide that He made His plan in view of it. Rather, the decisions themselves are involved in the plan of God, yet not so as to put a pressure or coercion upon the will of the creature, but the decision they would take would be entered in terms of their own power to take decisions in view of motives.

Here, again, I think it is wise to recognize that there is something that goes beyond our understanding. That is, the relationship between the sovereign will of God and the reality of the decision-making by finite rational agents is something that we do not fully fathom but that we consider as beyond the range of the powers of our finite logic. In terms of all this, we would say that with respect to salvation, God has sovereignly determined who in humanity would be saved and who would not be saved. This does not preclude the means whereby salvation is made available and proclaimed by the Word. It does not put coercion upon the sinner to compel him to accept the grace of God against his or her own will. It recognizes, however, that the distinction between saved and lost is a result of a sovereign determination of God, which carries on the certainty of the salvation of the elect and the certainty of the perdition of those who are not elect.

In this sense the language of the sovereignty of God, which we have discussed in lecture 3, applies particularly to the subject of salvation. There are some people whom God has predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son. These people He has foreknown in the sense that even before they came into existence, He has determined and cherished them as those on whom He would bestow His grace. These people He has elected in the sense of that He has appointed them unto salvation and this is according to the good pleasure of His will and to the glory of His matchless grace.

In the presence of these terms a number of alternative positions are at times advanced, and it is important that these should be outlined at the present. The first is that the language of election and predestination does not apply to the issue of who will be saved and who will not be saved, but that it applies not to individuals but to groups so that we might say that God has appointed that those who believe, whoever they might be, will be saved and those who are unbelievers, whoever they might be, by their unbelief will consign themselves unto damnation. Who may belong to one group or the other would be dependent upon the decision of the human beings involved and this might be known to God in advance, but it is not He who has determined the composition of the group, but rather the individual decision that is not in any way touched by the will or the power of God, and election and predestination simply mean that God has chosen to accept those who believe and to reject those who do not believe. It's a matter of categories, not of individual choice.

Another position that is sometimes presented is that election deals with the issue of service and not so much with the issue of salvation. In this sense, the passage of John 15:16 would apply where Jesus speaks to the disciples and says, "It is not you who have chosen me, but I myself have chosen you." In that passage it would appear that the major object of the choice is the participation in the service of God as members of the group of apostles, and the Lord is not speaking apparently at this point about the choosing for salvation or the rejecting of the offer of salvation, but rather the choosing of the Twelve for the function of apostles and the implied not choosing of all the remainder of the people in Palestine at that point.

Another position which also seeks to avoid the difficulty found in the connection between the divine choice and the human choice is the position that . . . God has chosen everybody for life so that we are all elect in Christ and we also are all reprobated in Him so that election and reprobation are both all-inclusive. That is to say, there is no one who is exempted from either election or reprobation. The problem with this view is that it evacuates the meaning of the words in this connection in Scripture and leads toward universalism, since a universal election would involve that no one would be lost in the end.

Arminians, generally speaking, emphasize that it is God's foreknowledge that permits Him to choose some and to reject others. God chooses those who He foresees will choose Him, and God rejects those who He foresees will reject Him, and so it is foreknowledge in the sense of advance information that safeguards the freedom of the human choice, which God Himself then ratifies in His own councils and brings to pass according to His purpose. These are the major ways in which the Calvinistic outlook that I have described is bypassed and an attempt is made to validate the human choice without resisting what the Scripture has to say.

There are a number of objections that are raised to the Calvinistic view, and it is by an examination of those objections that I would like to continue to elaborate on the whole subject. There are objections of a theoretical nature, that is, objections which claim that there are defects in the very nature of the teaching given. And there are objections of the practical nature, that is, objections which insist that if the position is accepted, then unfavorable or undesirable conduct will inevitably follow on the part of those who accept the view.

We start with theoretical objections, and these, again, can be divided in three. There are objections relating to the outlook which the doctrine of election compels us to have concerning the divine nature and His perfections. Second, there are difficulties in the outlook which this view implies concerning the nature of humanity and of its rational decisions, and finally there is an objection from the nature of truth which appears in this view to be bifurcating and therefore not to have an internal coherence that would be desirable.

First of all objections concerning what outlook is forced upon those who accept the view of the sovereign choice of God in predestination concerning the nature of God Himself: it is claimed that the Calvinistic or Reformed view involves a representation of God that is in conflict with His justice. That is, if God chose people for salvation and bypassed others, leaving them to their own perdition, those who are bypassed may complain that God is unjust toward them and the Scripture, however, makes it very plain that God is a God of justice. As Abraham said even as early as Genesis 18, "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" [v. 25]. And the answer to this question would be emphatically, Yes, indeed, the judge of all the earth will do right. God is going to act according to justice, just as He's not some kind of idea that we as humans have developed and to which God has no reference, but on the contrary the whole idea of justice comes from God, and our sense of justice in this respect is a reflection of a proper understanding of God.

Now then, if God is going to do justice, then it is only appropriate that people should be individually condemned for their own deeds and not in terms of anything that comes from another, and particularly not by virtue of the fact that they have not been chosen by God. We discuss this in part in the doctrine of original sin, where the element of divine justice was considered, and it is true that the Scripture does confront us with a dual outlook on the subject of responsibility. There is a responsibility that is primary, we might call it so, in each individual, in that they are held accountable by God for the decisions they have taken and God will not punish one person in the place of another in the ordinary administration of His justice. In that sense, Proverbs 17 says, "He who justifies the sinner and condemns the innocent is an abomination in the eyes of God." And God surely, Himself, will not do this. We may count for certain that only those who are viewed as responsible individually will in the final analysis be condemned by God.

The danger of this position when expressed in the way that I just did is that it fails to acknowledge the reality of a certain amount of corporate responsibility. So individual responsibility is strongly emphasized, particularly in the book of Ezekiel, where it is made plain that we cannot find an excuse for difficulties that we encounter because of the sin of others, our parents particularly, but that God holds us responsible especially for our actions. So the principle of individual responsibility, which is at the heart of much of our judicial understanding, is not to be viewed in isolation. It is to be combined with a reality of corporate responsibility, which involves people in various groups to which they belong—the family, the tribe, the country, the race. There are corporate elements there which involve us in a common responsibility before God.

The objection that the Calvinistic doctrine of election does make an improper representation of divine justice is grounded in an outlook of justice which appears to be inadequate, for justice ultimately deals with rights and not with the administration of favor. The question, therefore, is What does the sinner have a right to expect on the part of a just and loving God? The answer will be, the only thing to which he's entitled by right is precisely the administration of justice, and the administration of justice in the presence of the sin of humanity will inevitably lead to condemnation. If we are dealt with in accordance with justice, then we shall be condemned, and there is no other option that seems to be open.

If to say, therefore, that God is unjust in choosing some and bypassing the others is really not strictly a matter of justice. God is doing no injustice to the sinner that is condemned. In fact, that particular person meets precisely what justice requires in his case. What God is doing is to provide a favor to those who are not condemned, but the fact that He provides for one does not demand that He should provide a favor for another. We will discuss that in a moment in discussing the matter of fairness. But in terms of justice, the one thing that a person can properly require of God and is entitled to expect in all cases from His administration is the exercise of justice which will punish sin and which will reward that which is truly good and right in the eyes of God. If God did then function entirely in terms of His justice, there is no one that would escape condemnation. The whole human race would be lost—lock, stock, and barrel. Therefore, the fact that some are lost does not give to them a claim against God. There is nothing that anybody being condemned will be able to say to God which would

be a proper charge against His justice at the last judgment, and therefore the suggestion that in choosing some people for life, God commits an injustice toward those who are not so chosen is really gratuitous. It does not take account of the proper sense of justice which is to be administered.

Now, in addition to that, the Scripture has a number of additional considerations that bear on this subject, and notably it is apparent that there are those who are not treated in the same manner as others and will not have a proper claim against God at the judgment. We remember the statement of Jesus in Matthew 11 where He says, "Woe unto you, Chorazin and Bethsaida, for if the miracles that were accomplished in your midst had occurred in Sodom and Gomorrah, they would have repented. Therefore I tell you, at the day of judgment, Chorazin and Bethsaida will be treated more severely than even Sodom and Gomorrah" [see vv. 20–24]. According to that view, it is apparent that Chorazin and Bethsaida received advantages that were not given to Sodom and Gomorrah, and in spite of the monstrous sinfulness of Sodom and Gomorrah, they would not be equally culpable with Chorazin and Bethsaida who neglected their special opportunity of blessing. But the fact that they did not have the special blessing does not entail for Sodom and Gomorrah the outlook that now they can be saved or should be saved or that God has an obligation to save them.