

Of God's Plan and Purpose¹

By. A.N. Prior

Decree or Decrees?

In the Westminster Confession the doctrine of predestination is handled in Ch. III, "Of God's Eternal Decree". This title is significant, and was not arrived at without discussion in the Westminster Assembly. Divines were as well aware in the 17th century as in the 20th of the inadequacy of human language to describe the workings of the divine mind, and doubted the propriety of depicting God as in any sense having to "put two and two together". They therefore often spoke, as in this title, of God's "decree" rather than of His "decrees", explaining that only the poverty of our conceptions compels us to break up this one divine act of "purposing" into parts.

This use of the singular had its own dangers. "God's eternal decree" can come to be regarded as an entity somehow separate from God Himself, but eternal as He is, and contemplated by Him through all eternity, like the "Nous" or "Reason" emanating from God in Neoplatonic mystical speculation - a comparison actually made by some 17th and 18th century Calvinists (including Archbishop Leighton)² and regarded as a hint from the very heathen of the truth of their system. The place of the Son in the Trinity may be jeopardised by this "Decree". Calvinism needs to be carefully guarded against this tendency to worship God's Decree instead of God's Son.

In the meantime, let me simply throw out the suggestion that a revised Confession ought well make it quite explicit that God's decree or purpose means nothing else but God Himself decreeing or purposing.

The Free Personality of God

In its opening sections this chapter does in its own way guard against the tendency to detach God's decree from God Himself, and stresses the fact that the universe is both the product and the sphere

¹ Edited by David Jakobsen. The diary entry is in the Prior archive at The Bodleian Library in Oxford, box 7 in a folder containing some of Priors papers on theology. In the margin Prior (most likely) has written: Just read Forms of Thought of the Westminster. This could indicate that Prior wrote this text short after having published *Forms of Thought of the Westminster Confession*, in the journal *The Presbyterian*. Since the article referred to is written in 1942, it is likely that Prior also wrote *Of God's Plan and Purpose* in the late half of 1942, around the same time as *Can Religion be Discussed*, and *Faith, Unbelief and Evil*. Hasle has in his notes to the files in box 7 dated the text to 1940, since he considers the text to be a draft of *Forms of Thought of the Westminster Confession*. (See <http://www.prior.aau.dk/Boxes/Box+1+--+11/Box+7/Of+God%27s+Plan+or+Purpose/>) We are fortunate that we have a copy of *Forms of Thought of the Westminster Confession*, in box 11. It is contained in a rather extensive scrapbook which Prior gathered in that period. A closer reading of this text does not support a theory that *Of God's Plan and Purpose* should be considered a draft to *Forms of Thought of the Westminster Confession*. Both articles should on the other hand primarily be viewed in light of Priors dairy entry from 1942, as some of the historical studies in the reformed faith he decided to undertake as part of the vision he found in the midst of his crisis of faith.

² Robert Leighton (1611–1684), Bishop of Dunblane and Archbishop of Glasgow, even though he was a Presbyterian. He became known as Scotland's Apostle of Peace.

of God's free personal action in infinitely varied ways. Says Section 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: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence done to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established". Just how predestination and freewill are reconciled is not explained; but it is plainly affirmed that they are.

Section II refers to a controversy then current about the nature of God's foreknowledge. Calvinists held that God's knowledge was of two kinds – a knowledge of what was possible, and a knowledge of what was and would be actually the case. And His knowledge of what did and would actually happen boiled down to a knowledge of what He himself had purposed to do, since everything that happened did so as a result of His free decision and decree. Jesuits and Arminians, however, taught that there was a third kind of divine knowledge in between these two, a "*scientia media*"³ which was neither a knowledge of what was merely possible nor a knowledge of what He himself had decreed, but a knowledge of what was bound to happen because certain other things had happened, or because He had decreed certain other things. Some of the consequences⁴ of His decree were thus conceived as outside His control, though not beyond His foresight.

Jesuits and Arminians used this doctrine as a means of reconciling predestination and freewill. God, they argued, did not predestine men to believe or not to believe, but foreknew and accepted their belief or unbelief as the inevitable consequences of the various circumstances in which He decreed to place them. The "freedom" safeguarded by this device seems a very empty one – it is freedom only from the direct designing of God, but complete slavery to an impersonal system of necessary connections. Calvinists did not fail to point out that the only significant outcome the scheme was to divert our faith and trust as to our ultimate destiny from God alone to God – plus – necessity.

At a later date the description of the universe as an unbroken system of necessary connections was actually put forward as Calvinism (notably by Jonathan Edwards)⁵, its obvious incompatibility with any real freedom being considered sufficient to entitle it to the name; but this is a sort of Calvinism which the Confession of faith rejects, stating in this second section, "Although God knows whatever may or can come to pass on 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."

It would be generally agreed that there must be an even sharper distinction made today than is made in the Confession, between the Christian doctrine of predestination and philosophical theories of determinism. Barth, for one, would object to the word "unchangeably" in Sect. I, having said in

³ *Scientia media* or Middle Knowledge has gained a great resurgence in Modern Philosophical Theology. It is interesting that Prior already in 1942 was aware of *scientia media*. This is most likely the only place he mentions *scientia media*.

⁴ Words that are underlined in Priors MS are made into italics.

⁵ Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) by many acknowledged as "America's most important and original philosophical theologian." (Wainwright, William, "Jonathan Edwards", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2009 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2009/entries/edwards/>>.)

Vol. II of his Dogmatik that the 17th century conception of God's "unchangeableness" made Him a dead God rather than a living one, and "if God is dead, then Death is God"⁶ – blind impersonal force rules all.

The Objects of Predestination

This "dead God" seems to be only too much in evidence in the next two sections, which state, "By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death. These angels and men, thus predestinated and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed; and their number is so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished."

This seems to suggest among other things, that men are created "elect" and "reprobate", and so to overthrow the main reason for affirming any doctrine of "election" at all, namely to make it completely clear that believers are in no way a superior race distinct from the rest of men, but owe all they have and are to the free and gracious decision of God.

This is plainly one of those cases in which the Confession presses the categories of "general" and "special" too far, treating redemption as merely a special variety of the work of creation, and the redeemed as a "species" of creatures. It is a sort of religious biology or racism, and we can have none of it. Barth suggests that we should speak of God's activity of "election" without speaking of "the elect"; though that would take some doing.

It should in fairness be added however, that these sections are directed against a definite error, which still needs to be attacked in some way, namely the error that God does not direct His saving love towards persons but towards certain qualities of character, choosing or "electing" from eternity to regard certain virtues with special favour, foreseeing what persons will manifest these virtues, and determining to deal with them accordingly. It is God's free love towards persons as persons, even when He sees them as sinners, which is implicitly asserted in these two sections, and explicitly in the next against the view that He only loves men when He has seen or foreseen something in them worth loving.

The Order of God's Decrees

The belief of the 17th century divines that it is only through the imperfections of our language that we speak of God's decrees" in the plural at all, did not prevent them from speculating with some boldness, and arguing with some heat, about the precise order in which those same "decrees" were framed. There were two main controversies about this.

The first concerned the place of the fall in the system of divine decrees. Did God first decide to divide mankind into elect and reprobate, and then to let man fall in order to have men to save and

⁶ In Church Dogmatics 2, I Barth in a commentary on Polanus view on God as the pure immobile who is neither moved by anything else or even by himself, comments that the pure immobile is death. "If, then, the pure immobile is God, death is God. That is, death is posited as absolute and explained as the first and last and only real. It is said to have no limit and no end, to be omnipotent, so that there is no conqueror of death and for us no hope triumphant over death. Death itself holds the one place from which victory and hope can come. It is itself Lord of all. And if death is God, then God is dead." (494 Barth: Church Dogmatics, 2, I)

men to damn; or did He first decide to let man fall and then decided what to do about it, namely “elect” some and pass others by? The former view was termed “supralapsarianism”; the latter “infralapsarianism”. Supralapsarians held that creation as well as the fall was merely a means to the production of “elect” and “reprobate” souls. One way in which they stated this case was by saying that God determined to manifest a more marvellous love than love to objects which deserved it, and for that reason determined to have objects coming into being who didn’t deserve it, and so arranged that man should fall. This is uncomfortably reminiscent of the argument that we should maintain an economic system which produces poverty, so that men will not lack objects on which to exercise the grace of charity.

The second controversy concerned the place in the system of God’s decrees of His decision to send His Son to die for sinners. Did He first decide whom He would save (i.e. who “the elect” would be), and then to send Christ to save them; or did He decide to send Christ to atone for the sins of mankind, and then selected those who would participate in this salvation by the gift of faith? The former view that of orthodox Calvinism, involved the consequence that Christ died for the elect only. The latter view, that of “Amyraldism”⁷, propounded in England by Richard Baxter,⁸ was an attempt to save the doctrine of Predestination from this consequence. Amyraldism, by suggesting that Christ’s intentions were more benevolent than His Father’s, tends to set the Persons of the Trinity at odds; while Calvinist orthodoxy has the disadvantage of suggesting that the Gospel is not such an open offer to its hearers as it purports to be.

The Assembly’s Decision

The Westminster Assembly contained ardent supporters of all these views, and its final decision was a piece of ingenuity and statesmanship comparable with Britain’s March orders⁹ to India. Sect. VI of the chapter under consideration reads:

“As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath he ... foreordained all the means thereunto. Whereafter they who are elect being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ; are effectually called unto faith in Christ by his Spirit working in due season; are justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept by his power through faith unto salvation. Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only.”

It is not stated whether their “being fallen in Adam” is or is not a means to the glorifying of the elect; but it is affirmed that God who chose the end also planned the means. Nor is it stated whether or not others beside the elect are “redeemed by Christ”; but it is affirmed that only the elect are redeemed and called and justified etc. (had the conjunction “or” been used, then Assembly’s agreement would have ended). The Confessions revisers will indeed do well if they are as skilful as this in stating the matters quite fully without landing themselves in such dogmatism on purely speculative issues. They did the trick, not indeed by using no words of more than two syllables, but

⁷ Amyraldism is a version of Calvinism that rejects the Calvinistic view on the Atonement as being limited to the elect only.

⁸ Richard Baxter (12 November 1615 – 8 December 1691) Theologian whose theology is primarily laid out in *Christian Directory* (1673), and *Methodus theologiae Christianae* (London, 1681).

⁹ The MS is unclear at this point. I wish to thank C. Louis Chappuis for his help with deciphering the MS here.

by using their short words well. Their skill and care throughout the Confession in manipulating words like “being” and “and” contributes much to that strength of language which “F”¹⁰ has noted in their work.

Ends and Means

It may be argued, all the same, that the categories of “end” and “means” are pressed to far in this ingenious section, as those of “general” and “special” are elsewhere. We cannot regard election as simply a means to redemption; still less can we regard the fall as a means to the masking off of the elect from the rest of men; and the Confession does not ask us to. But it also seems improper to treat the whole work of Christ as simply a means to the personal salvation of those selected for the honour. In Christ on the cross the Father sees not only someone whom He is using as a means to an end, but the Son in whom His love eternally rests.

Conversely, the elect are not “chosen” for their own sake alone, but to further wider aims of grace. The fruits of election, and means to glory, which this section enumerates all take the form of personal bonus bestowed on elect individuals, rather than ways in which the “chosen” man goes forth in self-forgetfulness to serve God’s ends in the world. Associated with this defect is the chapter’s complete omission of all reference to God’s “purposing”, decreeing” or “foreordaining” of the various stages in the advancement of His Kingdom. This criticism is, of course, identical with that of James Orr¹¹ quoted in the article on “The forms of Thought of the Westminster Standards.”

Duty and Destiny

All that needs to be said of Sect. VII is that the Confession is careful not to make God so directly responsible for the sins which lead to perdition as He is for the graces which lead to glory. Salvation is God’s doing but damnation is our own.

The last section warns us to handle this whole body of doctrine “with due prudence and care”. We are not to take it for granted that we are “elect”, live as we please, and argue that it is “all experience” which will be turned to our good in the end. God’s purpose for us personally are hidden from us, and cannot be thus used as a guide for action. The only guide we are given is “the will of God revealed in his word”, and we will be wise to show our faith in God’s good intentions for us by attempting to keep the commandments which He has given us in the same place Holy Writ as He has given us such facts about His purpose as we need to know to keep us duly humble and grateful.

This warning is certainly necessary, though the underlying distinction between God’s hidden will of decree” and His revealed “will of command” – between His purposes for us and His demands upon us, our destiny and our duty can be overdone.¹² We cannot discover our duty from a general acquaintance with what happens in the world, but we cannot discover God’s purposes from that source either. And what we are told of God’s purposes in the Bible is to some extent a guide to action, as would have been plain if this chapter had included something about God’s planning of the successive “constitutions” by which He would set up His rule among men.

¹⁰ It is uncertain who Prior might be referring to as F.

¹¹ James Orr (1844–6 -1913) Scottish Presbyterian.

¹² Prior also criticizes this distinction indirectly in Faith, Unbelief and Evil. (Prior, 2011)

P.¹³

¹³ At this time Prior signed his articles with a single P.