

—A Study of the Westminster Confession of Faith—
The Westminster Doctrine of God's Eternal Decree, Chp. 3

I. The Eternal Decree of God

- A. Having spoken of God and His perfections and of the Holy Trinity, the Confession now speaks of the *intrinsic* acts of the divine nature which, however, have a respect to things *outside* of Him.
- B. From eternity, God has had an unchangeable plan with reference to His creation. This is a conclusion which necessarily flows from **who** and **what** God is (cf. Chap. 2)
1. It's proper to speak of the *decree* of God in the singular because there was only one act of His infinite mind about future things.
 - a) We tend to speak of the *decrees* of God, as if there were many, because we think of things in succession and because the objects of His decree are so many that they seem to require a distinct purpose for each. But an infinite understanding does not proceed by steps since His knowledge does not advance by degrees. God sees and knows all things at a single glance, Acts 15.18. Thus His decree and purpose for the future was singular and necessarily all-encompassing.
 2. The **infinite intelligence** of God necessarily presupposes an eternal decree. **Hodge**: "As an infinitely intelligent Creator and providential Ruler, He must have had a definite purpose with reference to the being and destination of all that He has created."
 - a) If we believe God to be an intelligent Being and consider what this implies, then we cannot deny that there's a divine purpose for His work. An intelligent Being is One who knows and judges, who purposes ends and devises means, who acts from design, conceives a plan, and then proceeds to execute it.
 - b) His choice to do as He has done, is doing, and will do with reference to creation, was His *decree*. **Hodge**: "The decree of God is merely a purpose which He executes in His works of creation and providence." Cf. WSC 7-8
 3. The **independence** of God necessarily presupposes an eternal decree.
 - a) As the sole Creator and the alone eternal and self-existent Being, the decree of God necessarily encompasses all that was, is, and is to be, in both time and eternity. Nothing at all could possibly stand outside of it because He alone is the Cause of all that is, the Author of all Being, the Governor of all creation.
 - b) That the plan of God comprehends and determines all things and events of every kind that comes to pass is also rendered certain "from the fact that all God's works of creation and providence constitute one system. No event is isolated, either in the physical or moral world, either in heaven or on earth.... The original intention which determines one event must also determine every other event related to it as cause, condition, or consequent, direct and indirect, immediate and remote. Hence the plan which determines general ends must also determine even the minutest element comprehended in the system of which those ends are parts." —**Hodge**
 - c) **Dick**: "The decree of God relates to all future things without any exception. Whatever is done in time was fore-ordained before the beginning of time. His purpose was concerned with *everything*, whether great or small, whether good or evil—although in reference to the latter, it may be necessary to distinguish between *appointment* and *permission*. It was concerned with things necessary, free, and contingent.... It was concerned about our life, and our death; about our state in time and our state in eternity. In short, the decree of God is as comprehensive as His government, which extends to all creatures and to all that exists."
 - (1) In other words, we may learn the *extent* of the divine decree from the dispensations of *providence*, in which it is executed. The care of providence reaches to the most

insignificant creatures and the most minute events, e.g., the death of a sparrow and the fall of a hair. The decree therefore entails “whatsoever comes to pass”. Cf. WSC 7

- (2) The Scriptural testimony:
 - (a) There is an eternal decree, Eph 1.11
 - (b) It includes otherwise chance events, Prov 16.33; Mt 10.29-30
 - (c) It includes the free actions of men, Prof 21.1; Eph 2.10; Phil 2.13
 - (d) It includes the sinful actions of men, Acts 2.23; 4.27-28; compare Gen 37.28 with Gen 45.7-8; Isa 10.5
 - i) **Hodge**: “The problem of the permission of sin is to us insoluble, because unexplained. The *fact* is certain, the *reason* beyond discovery. If God be infinitely wise and powerful, He might have prevented it. It is evident that it is consistent with absolute righteousness to permit it and overrule it.”
 - ii) **Dick**: “God does not will the sins of man, or effect them by any operation of His power; He merely arranges His plan with a view to them, and overrules them for His glory.”
4. The **foreknowledge** of God necessarily presupposes an eternal decree. God foreknows all future things, not because they of themselves will be, but because He decreed them to be. His decree of them to be provides the foundation of His certain knowledge that they will be, since nothing could find an existence in the future unless He decreed that it should have that existence.
 - a) Upon the ground of His omnipotence God *knows* all things *possible* (though He has decreed nothing concerning them), and upon His will or decree God *foreknows* all things *future* (because He has decreed them to be). Of all the things that God’s almighty power could accomplish, He purposed and decreed to do this and not that; and consequently the one became certain, and the other remained only possible.
 - b) Thus His *knowledge* of all things possible to Him preceded His decree, while His *foreknowledge* of all things future from Him is subsequent to His decree.
5. The **immutability** of God necessarily presupposes an eternal decree. If God be of one mind, which none can change, He must have unalterably fixed everything in His purpose which He effects in His providence. It’s impossible for an immutable God to do anything in time or eternity that He did not originally purpose to do before He did anything.
6. The **works** of God themselves necessarily presuppose an eternal decree as the plan of which they are the development.
 - a) It must be admitted that God intended to create the world before He actually created it; that He intended to make man before He actually made him; that He intended to govern the world He had made, according to certain laws, before He actually created them; and it must be admitted that when He resolved to create the world and man and to establish laws, that He had some ultimate object in view, and this object was the true reason or the final cause why everything was created. This *intention* of God is His decree.
 - b) **Dick**: “In short, the decree of God is His *will*, in which the exertions of His power and the manifestations of His other perfections, originated. When we speak of His decreeing or purposing, we mean nothing mysterious and profound, but merely, that before He acted He *willed* to act, that His operations *ad extra* were not the effects of necessity, but of wise and eternal counsel and design.”
7. The **Characteristics** of God’s decree §§ 1-2
 - a) It reflects the *freedom of God’s sovereignty*, Isa 40.13-14
 - (1) God was not impelled to decree from any need in the divine nature. God is self-sufficient and stood in need of nothing. Neither was He under any external constraint, because God is impassable and cannot be acted upon from without. He was alone when He made His decree and His determinations were influenced by no external cause.

- (2) His decree must therefore be the sovereign and free act of His will. He was under no control or compelling force, but acted according to His own infallible sovereignty, Rom 11.33. He was free to decree or not to decree, and to decree one thing and not another. This is the necessary liberty of Him who is supreme, independent, and sovereign in all His dispensations.
 - (3) If the decree of God is free then it follows that He *could have* decreed differently than He did. We are ignorant of the reasons for His choice—other than that He chose what He deemed to be most to His glory—but we cannot say that no other choice could have been made. Once the choice was made, *then* the things included in the choice were absolutely necessary; before the decree was made, nothing at all was necessary.
 - (a) “No necessity can be supposed to influence the procedure of a self-existent and independent Being, except the necessity arising from His infinite perfections, of always acting in a manner worthy of Himself. “ —**Dick**
- b) It reflects God's *wisdom*
- (1) God's decree was not the result of His mere will, but of His will under the direction of His wisdom, Eph 1.9, 11; Rom 11.33.
 - (2) God's wisdom is discovered in the selection of the most proper ends and of the fittest means of accomplishing them. This is clear from the execution of God's decree in providence; for every proof of wisdom in the providence of God is a proof of the wisdom of the plan which purposed it.
 - (3) Very little of God's works are visible to our eyes and open to our perception, but from the wisdom evident in what we see and observe, we should satisfy our minds and assure our hearts about the rest that God's decree is wise in *all* its parts. Which is to say, as far as we can go everything we see is worthy of God; should we not then believe that beyond the point which bounds our research, there is the same order, the same beauty, the same correspondence with the divine character and attributes as in what is visible?
- c) It reflects God's *eternality and immutability*, Heb 6.17
- (1) It is readily accepted that the creation of the world and some overarching purposes were eternally decreed, but it is maintained by many that those decisions which relate to things dependent upon man's free will and upon contingencies are made in time and not from eternity—because these things could not be known from eternity. This opinion is so far from receiving any support from Scripture, that it's directly contradicted by it.
 - (2) The Scripture expressly declares that *everything* that was to happen was known to God from all eternity, Acts 15.18, which cannot mean less than that God's decree is eternal. To suppose *any* of the divine decree is to be made in time is to suppose that some new occasion has occurred, some unforeseen event or combination of circumstances has taken place, which has induced the Most High to pronounce a new sentence or form a new resolution.
 - (3) **Shaw**: “If from eternity God knew all things that come to pass, then from eternity He must have ordained them; for if they had not been determined upon, they could not have been foreknown as certain.”
 - (4) **Dick**: “No man, who believes that the divine understanding is infinite, comprehending the past, the present, and the future, will ever assent to the doctrine of temporal decrees.”
- d) God's decree is *absolute and unconditional*
- (1) God has not foreseen anything because He foresaw it as future; and the execution of His decree is not suspended upon any condition which may or may not be performed. This is the principle which chiefly distinguishes Calvinists from Arminians, who maintain that God's decree is not absolute but conditional.

- (2) Some parts of God’s decree are conditional in the sense that something is supposed to go before the event which is in view, and that, since this order is established, the one will not take place without the other and is then *conditioned* upon it. An example can be seen in God’s promise to save Paul and all his companions on their life-threatening voyage to Italy (Acts 27.24, 44). The promise was conditioned on the sailors staying in the ship, v. 31. Another is seen in God’s purpose to save many from the wrath to come, which is conditioned on their believing in Christ and repenting of sin.
- (a) But these parts of the decree are conditional only *in appearance*. They merely state the order in which the events should be accomplished and establish the connection between the means and the end; but they leave neither the means nor the end uncertain.
 - (b) When God decreed to save Paul and his companions upon condition that they all stay in the ship, He also decreed that they stay in the ship. When God decreed to save only those who believe, He also decreed to give them faith, cf. Rom 8.30.
 - (c) Therefore no part of the decree is conditional in the absolute sense that it depends upon the will of man, of which he is the sovereign master, Isa 46.10.
 - (d) **Hodge**: “A very obvious distinction must always be kept in mind between *an event* being conditioned on other events, and *the decree* of God with reference to that event being conditioned. Calvinists believe, as all men must, that all events in the system of things depend upon their causes, and are suspended on conditions.... But the all-comprehensive purpose of God embraces and determines the cause and the conditions, as well as the event suspended upon them. Instead of altering them, the decree of God *determines* the nature of events and their natural relations. It makes free actions free in relation to their agents, and contingent events contingent in relation to their conditions; while, at the same time, it makes the entire system of events, and every element embraced in it, certainly future. *An absolute decree is one which, while it may determine many conditional events by determining their conditions, is itself suspended on no condition.*”
 - (e) Therefore the decree of God is absolute and unconditional and in no way depends upon a condition that might not be performed, 2Th 2.13; Eph 2.8
 - (f) Conditional decrees are inconsistent with the infinite wisdom, independence, power, and sovereignty of God. He who asserts conditional decrees must assert that God is ignorant of the result, that the event is not in His power, or that He has determined nothing concerning it and has left it to chance—all which the Scriptures expressly deny, Acts 15.18; Eph 1.11.

C. Answering Objections — God did ‘unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass’, but this comprehensive statement “requires three qualifying fences lest we should wander in directions that would prove dangerous.” —**Van Dixhoorn**

1. It has been objected that this doctrine makes God the author of sin
 - a) The Confession guards against this inference by declaring that God has so ordained whatsoever comes to pass as that He is not thereby the author of sin.
 - (1) God is not the author of sin because He is absolutely holy, because sin is a violation of His revealed will, and because man as a free agent is the responsible cause of his own actions. The sinfulness of the action is man’s responsibility though the action is God’s decreed will, who permitted the sin for the purpose of overruling it in the interests of His glory and His people’s salvation, Gen 50.20.
 - b) In this respect the decree of God is either effective or permissive. It is *effective* with respect to all that comes to pass while it is *permissive* with respect to the evil that is in the sinful actions which come to pass, e.g. Acts 2.23; cp. 1Jn 1.5; Js 1.13; Jn 19.11, 15-16. **Berkhof**:

“His decree with respect to sin is a permissive decree.” We must distinguish between an action purely as such, and the sinfulness of the action.

- c) **Hodge**: “It must be remembered that the purpose of God with respect to the sinful acts of men and wicked angels is in no degree to *cause* the evil, nor to *approve* of it, but only to *permit* the wicked agent to perform it, and then to *overrule* it for His own most wise and holy ends. The same infinitely perfect and self-consistent decree ordains the moral law which forbids and punishes all sin, and at the same time *permits* its occurrence, limiting and determining the precise channel to which it shall be confined, the precise end to which it shall be directed, and overruling its consequences for good, Gen 50.20.”
 2. It has been objected that this doctrine takes away human freedom
 - a) The Confession guards against this inference by declaring that no violence “is offered to the will of the creatures.”
 - b) The tie which connects the divine decree and human liberty is invisible, Ps 139.6; Dt 29.29. We are not required to reconcile the divine decree and human liberty but to confess, according to holy Scripture, that God has decreed all things which come to pass *and* that men are responsible for their actions. E.g. Acts 2.23; 4.27-28.
 - c) Though the decree of God be certain and all-comprehensive, the fact remains that we sin freely and willingly, and we know it. We feel that although no man acts independent of God yet we are free in our actions, so that we excuse ourselves when we have done our duty and accuse ourselves when we have neglected it. **Shaw**: “Sentiments of approbation and disapprobation, in reference to our own conduct or that of other men, would have no existence in our minds if we believed that men are necessary agents.”
 3. It has been objected that this doctrine makes people slothful in seeking salvation
 - a) Such cavilers maintain that if God has determined whether or not they will be saved, it makes no difference what they may do. But this is hardly correct, because man does not know what God has decreed respecting him. Moreover, God has decreed not only the final destiny of man, but also the means by which it will be realized. And seeing the end is decreed only as the result of the appointed means, it encourages rather than discourages the use of means, Lk 13.3.
 4. It has been objected that this doctrine takes away the contingency of second causes
 - a) The Confession guards against this inference by declaring that rather than taking away the liberty or contingency of second causes, it *establishes* it.
 - b) In other words, God uses secondary causes by not only decreeing what will happen in the end, but the very steps leading to it; Rom 10.14-17. Nothing can be more contingent than the casting of the lot and yet the Lord is the determiner of the outcome, Prov 16.33.
 - c) **Van Dixhoorn**: “The important thing to remember is that the liberty or freedom of these causes is real; the contingency or possibility of these events is not taken away.... All events—even those events which we see as secondary causes—are also part of God’s decree, and so God’s decree *establishes* these causes and events too.”
 - d) Every means whatsoever necessary in all creation to accomplish the end for which God decreed, is included in the decree itself; nothing is uncertain, chance is nonexistent, and fatalism is unbiblical (cf. Heidelberg Q&A 1).
- D. Predestination §§ 3-5
1. The divine decree with respect to the spiritual and eternal state of men and angels is called predestination and it consists of two branches generally distinguished by the names of *election* and *reprobation*, Rom 9.22-23; Eph 1.4-6; Prov 16.4
 - a) Besides what has already been established, that the eternal state of angels was included in the decree is clearly inferred from the mention of “elect angels” in 1Tim 5.21. As they were created by God, so it was not without an act of His will that some of them were created to

- stand immutably in obedience while others were created with a mutable will and were in fact permitted to fall.
- b) Since election *is* taught in the Bible, some will allow an election of nations (like the Jewish nation over all the Gentile nations) or an election to external privileges (like the choice of Bethlehem for Christ's birth or Galilee for Christ's ministry), but greatly oppose the election of individuals.
- (1) However, the Scriptures clearly speak of the election of individuals, Acts 13.48; 2Th 2.13; Eph 1.4; Rom 8.29-30; 9.23; 16.13; Phil 4.3; Heb 12.23; 1Pet 1.2; Rev 13.8; 20.15
 - (2) Moreover, the blessings to which men are elected are such as pertain to individuals and not to communities or nations, 2Th 2.13; Gal 4.4-5; Eph 1.4-5
 - (3) The election of which the Bible speaks (as it relates to men) is an express purpose of God to confer salvation upon certain individuals fallen together with the whole human race. It is not an election of characters but of *persons* (Acts 13.48; Eph 1.4-5), i.e., it is not a general design to give eternal life to those who shall repent and believe, but a specification of those persons by name who shall actually believe unto eternal life (Heb 12.23; Rev 13.8; 20.15; Pr 8.31).
 - (a) The elect are a class of persons whom God foreknew (i.e. fore-loved), and whom, in consequence of His foreknowledge, He effectually calls unto salvation, and distinguishes in His dispensation of grace as He had previously distinguished them in His purpose, Rom 11.5, 7.
- c) Some who allow the doctrine of election greatly oppose the idea of reprobation.
- (1) For most, the reason seems to be because they represent reprobation as an arbitrary and groundless decision, and God, in the act of it, to be a whimsical despot who sports with eternal destinies of men and angels for His own pleasure.
 - (a) Neither of these ideas is in any way connected with the biblical doctrine. The biblical doctrine of reprobation is the logical and necessary consequent to the biblical doctrine of election. In electing some men, and not all, to everlasting life, God has effectively reprobated the rest to everlasting damnation.
 - (2) However, the human race, out of which God elected a people for Himself, was not regarded simply as a mass of creatures, but a mass of sinners. In other words, they were considered as standing in their guilt and under God's just condemnation as covenant-breakers.
 - (3) Thus the election of *any* was a matter of pure grace while the leaving of *any* to perish in sin was a matter of pure justice. In neither case was God unjust or arbitrary or whimsical, and in neither case was any man unjustly or unfairly treated. For the glory of His grace, some were elected to life, and for the glory of His justice, the remainder were given over to their due consequences of their sin, namely, reprobation.
 - (4) **Dick:** "God, who is independent and owes nothing to his creatures, may give or withhold his favors according to His pleasure. If men have forfeited *all claim* to his regard, if they have fallen under his wrath, and might have been doomed to hopeless misery, there's not the shadow of injustice in the exercise of his mercy only to a portion of the criminals. When one man is exempted from punishment, no injury is done to his companions in condemnation, who are left to the vengeance of the law, because they rightly deserved to suffer it; and they do not become less guilty because he is pardoned. The cry against election, as if it made God a respecter of persons, is a senseless one, and proceeds either from stupidity or malignity. He only is a respecter of persons, who confers favors upon some and withholds them from others equally deserving; not he, who, where *none* has a claim upon him, disposes of his gifts, in the free exercise of the power over them which naturally belongs to him. May he not do what he will with his own?"

- (5) **Berkhof**: “It is sometimes said that the doctrine of predestination exposes God to the charge of injustice. But this is incorrect. We could speak of injustice only if man had a claim on God and God owed man eternal salvation. But the situation is entirely different if all men have *forfeited* the blessings of God—as they have. No one has the right to call God to account for electing some and rejecting others. He would have been perfectly just if He had not saved any, Mt 20.14-15; Rom 9.14-15.”
2. The predestination of men was *for God's own glory*: for the glory of His grace and love in the merciful redemption of a Bride for His Son, and for the glory of His justice and law in the just condemnation of the wicked.
 3. The predestination of men is *unalterable*. This is self-evident, given the nature of the decree itself, out of which nothing can exist, and within which all things are interdependent as means leading to the ultimate end for which the decree itself was made, and given the nature of God, who is perfectly wise and holy and whose works are all perfect, Dt 32.4.
 - a) Arminians erroneously hold that saints may fall out of a state of grace and lose their salvation. They teach that God's election holds a man tight against all who threaten to loose him, except the man himself. But the Scriptures expressly declare that the counsel of the Lord stands forever, Ps 33.11, and Christ Himself states that none of the elect shall be lost, Jn 6.37-40.
 - (1) Besides, it is also affirmed that “the foundation of the Lord stands sure, having this seal, The Lord knows them that are his,” (2Tim 2.19). The “foundation” here signifies God's eternal decree, which is the ground of His knowledge of those who are His. And when we consider that these words of the Apostle were introduced in connection with the mention of false teachers who had overthrown the faith of some (vv. 15-18), we are led to infer that this verse is meant to teach the stability of the divine purpose respecting the elect, and their subsequent security against the danger of total and final apostasy.
 - (2) Also, the immutability of the decree of election is evident from the close connection established between election and glorification in Rom 8.30. Here a chain stretches from eternity to eternity, not one link of which can be broken. **Dick**, “The purpose of God according to election *shall* stand. The rage of the world, the malice of the devil, and the will of man, froward and perverse as it is, shall not be able to overthrow it, Isa 46.9-10.”
 - b) Thus the number of the elect can neither be increased nor diminished. **Van Dixhoorn**: “the number is immune to mathematical addition or subtraction.”
 - (1) It was a decision made before the foundation of the world (Eph 1.4) and the entire work of redemption is so exactly built upon it, that in order for a single person more to be saved, the entire work of Christ would have to be repeated (cp. Heb 10.14-18 with 10.26-31).
 - (2) Moreover, if a single person were to fall out of the state of grace, then the entire work of Christ would be so called into question and proven to be faulty that not a single soul could have rest or peace for all eternity, since his own security would also be in question. Thus the gospel preaches a complete salvation by a complete Saviour.
 4. The predestination of men was *in Christ*. This phrase intimates that God determined the mediation of His Son as the means by which His purpose of election would be executed.
 - a) When He chose a people to save, He then gave them to His Son to redeem, Jn 17.6. He constituted Him as their Head; He set Him up from everlasting as their Representative and Surety, by whom all things would be performed which His justice required as the condition of their final happiness, Eph 1.5, 9; 1Th 5.9.
 - b) In other words, the mediation of Christ was not the cause but the consequence of election. God decreed the salvation of the elect as an *end* and the mediation of His Son as *the means* to obtain it. Therefore eternal life and all the blessings of grace were promised to Christ, as the

Federal Head of the elect, since they have no right to them in themselves, Eph 2.12-13; 2Tim 1.9; Tit 1.2; 2Cor 1.20

- c) **Shaw**, “The mediation of Christ was necessary in order that the effects of electing love might be bestowed upon God’s chosen in a way consistent with the rights and honor of His justice; but election itself originated in divine sovereignty, and had no other cause than the good pleasure of God’s will (Eph 1.5).”
- 5. The predestination of men is of *pure, sovereign, and free grace*.
 - a) In contrast to the Arminian opinion, in the election of certain persons to eternal life, God acted from His own sovereign will and was not influenced by any foresight of their faith or other qualifications.
 - (1) **Van Dixhoorn**, “Of course the Lord sees all things; but He did not peer into the future in order to find sparks of faith that He could fan into flame. . . . He did not predestine us to salvation because He predicted our good works, or knew we would persevere in the Christian life. There is nothing in us that motivated His choice. He set no conditions which He needed to foresee before He would choose us. All such notions need to be deconstructed before we can advance in the school of grace. There was no human cause that set God in motion towards our salvation.”
 - b) Election is ascribed in Scripture to grace, to the exclusion of works; and these two causes are represented as incompatible and mutually destructive, Rom 11.4-7. Besides, we should note that faith and holiness, which Arminians make the *cause* of election, are expressly said in Scripture to be *effects* of it, 2Th 2.13; Eph 1.4. The order in Scripture is the exact reverse of what the Arminians claim. Men are not first holy, or foreseen to be holy, and then chosen; they are first chosen, and then holy; their holiness is not the cause, but the end of the decree, Acts 13.48; Jn 15.16.
 - (1) In Rom 9, Paul produces the case of Jacob and Esau as an illustration of this subject and traces the predestination of individuals—to happiness or misery, to the sovereignty of God without any consideration of their works, Rom 9.10-13.
 - c) Moreover, it is impossible to conceive that God could foresee faith and holiness in men previous to their election. Human nature being totally depraved, faith and holiness can have no existence in them unless as effects of grace, Eph 2.10; Acts 13.48.
 - (1) Faith and repentance are the work of a regenerated soul and regeneration is a sovereign work of God (Jn 3.5; 2Cor 5.17). Thus faith and repentance are conditioned upon God’s prior work of regeneration and cannot then be a condition for it.
 - d) Also, Scripture states that election is conditioned upon the good pleasure of God’s will and not on something in man, Eph 1.5, 11; Mt 11.25-26; Jn 15.16, 19.
 - e) Finally, God claims the right of sovereign, unconditional election as His prerogative, Rom 9.21; Rom 9.16; Jn 1.11-13.

E. Election § 6

- 1. **Hodge**: “This section teaches that although the decree of God is one eternal, all-comprehensive intention, the several elements embraced within it necessarily sustain the relation to one another of means to ends.” God has appointed the specific means for the complete salvation of the elect and these means are inseparably connected in the decree with the end, which therefore cannot fail to be accomplished.
 - a) It pleased God to accomplish His eternal purpose and execute His eternal decree in the works of creation and providence, both of which are carried out by systems of means in subordination to predetermined ends.
 - b) God specifically tells us in Scripture that the salvation of the elect will be carried on by one thing serving as means in support of another until the *end* is reached, which is the praise of His glory, 2Th 2.13; Eph 1.3-6, 11-12, 13-14; 2.8-10; 1Th 5.9.

- c) It is therefore a gross abuse of the doctrine of election for persons to expect that they will attain the end (salvation) while they neglect the use of the appointed means. **Dick**: “No man acts in this manner in regard to the common affairs of life, and to do so in matters of infinitely higher importance would be the highest presumption and folly.”
2. The means appointed by God for the salvation of the elect was their *redemption* by Christ and the *application* of that redemption unto them by the Holy Spirit.
- a) This redemption refers not to their salvation specifically and experientially, but to their ransom and purchase by Christ on the cross. In order to bring the elect to glory, God foreordained both Christ’s atoning work on Calvary—the *accomplishment* of redemption, and the Spirit’s subsequent *application* of that redemption in due season and by specific blessings.
- b) Thus the redemption of all the elect, while it was immutably *decreed* in eternity, was actually *accomplished* in history by Christ on His cross. The application of this redemption by the Spirit takes place according to the same decree by the regenerating and sanctifying work of the Spirit in the life of each elect person.
- c) It’s obvious, then, that Christ’s atonement and the Spirit’s regeneration are both appointed means to bring the elect to glory and therefore inseparably and unchangeably connected with that end.
- (1) It is therefore impossible that any of the elect should not be saved and brought to glory because the death of Christ did not merely render the salvation of all men possible or bring all men into a salvable state, but instead actually purchased and secured a certain salvation to all for whom He died, Jn 6.37; 17.4.
- (2) And it is likewise impossible that any should be saved besides the elect, because the works of Christ and of the Spirit are means directly connected to an immutable end, an end which concerns none but the elect for whose sake they were appointed, Jn 17.9; Rom 8.28; Jn 6.64-65; 10.15, 26-29; 8.47; 1Jn 2.19.
- (3) It’s clear, then, that Christ died for none but the elect, and likewise the Spirit calls, regenerates, justifies, adopts, sanctifies, keeps, and glorifies none but the elect. The work of redemption in all its parts is a work of specific intention for a specific people, a people committed to Christ by the Father and for whom Christ came, Jn 8.34-47; Jn 17.6-24; Tit 2.11-14; 3.4-7.
- d) **Shaw**: “Thus our Confession, agreeably to Scripture, represents each of the divine persons as acting a distinct part in the glorious work of human redemption, and as entirely concurring in eternal counsel and operation. The Father chose a definite number of mankind sinners to eternal life; the Son laid down His life for those who were chosen in Him before the foundation of the world, and obtained for them eternal redemption; and the Holy Spirit applies the purchased redemption to them in due season. Here all is perfect harmony. The Son fulfills the will of the Father, and the Spirit’s work is in entire accordance with the purpose of the Father and the mediation of the Son.”
3. A Blessed Hope, A Solemn Reality
- a) The good news of the gospel is a blessed hope to all who believe because it testifies to us that God has given us, in Christ, a complete salvation that will certainly be consummated in glory. We shall be kept by the power of God and brought home to glory. We shall not be lost, we shall not make shipwreck of our faith. We shall not be disappointed in our hope or ashamed in our confidence. As Christ is our Saviour and as the Spirit is our Comforter, so the Father is our Father and His heaven is our inheritance.
- b) But the solemn reality included in the gospel is that God will not save everyone. Christ does not intercede for everyone (Jn 17.9); God will not draw everyone to Christ by the Spirit (Jn 6.64-65); many will not follow Christ because they are not His sheep (Jn 10.26); many will not listen to or hear Christ’s words because they are not of God (Jn 8.47); many will even

leave the church because they are not really part of it (1Jn 2.19). The blessings of the covenant of redemption are immutable and sure, but they are for the elect only (Rom 8.28-39). This should greatly assure us of our security in Christ (1Jn 4.19), but it should also greatly humble us and compel us to devote ourselves with diligence to the means of our salvation.

F. Reprobation § 7

1. To reprobate is to disapprove or to reject and the term is used to express that act of God by which, when all mankind were before the eye of His omniscience, He rejected some while He chose others.
 - a) It's clear that there is such a thing as reprobation taught in Scripture, Rev 13.8; 20.15; Rom 9.22; Jude 4; 1Pet 2.8; Mal 1.2-3; Rom 9.15-18; Rom 11.7.
 - b) **Dick**: "However awful and revolting to our feelings the doctrine may be, however liable to objections it may seem, and whatever startling inferences our perverse reason may deduce from it, it is impossible with any appearance of fairness to deny that it is taught in the Scriptures."
2. In teaching this doctrine, Scripture calls us to confess three things with respect to it
 - a) The rejection of the reprobate is a sovereign choice
 - (1) The Confession states that this act of God was carried out "according to the unsearchable counsel of His own will" and therefore cannot be resolved by anything less than His own sovereign will, "whereby He extends or withholds mercy as He pleases, for the glory of His sovereign power over His creatures."
 - (2) **Dick**: "If we inquire into the reason why God passed over some in His eternal decree, while He extended mercy to others, we must content ourselves with the words of our Lord, which were spoken in reference to the execution of His purpose: "Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in your sight" (Mt 11.26)."
 - b) Their rejection involves a sovereign withholding of grace
 - (1) Even though their guilt is presupposed in their reprobation, it's clear that their guilt was not the cause of their reprobation because the elect lay in the same guilt as they. Both classes of men, the elect and the reprobate, appeared in the eye of God to be guilty, polluted, and worthy of death. The sinfulness of the reprobate could not therefore be the cause of their rejection since it did not also cause the rejection of the elect.
 - (2) The withholding of grace from some and the giving of grace to others was therefore a sovereign choice on the part of Him who has mercy on whom He will have mercy and hardens whom He will harden, Rom 9.14-18.
 - (3) **Shaw**: "As it would have been just in God to pass by the whole of our race (Eph 2.1-3), and to deal with them as He did with the angels who sinned, it must be manifest that, in electing some to life, He did no injustice to the non-elect, whose case would have been just as bad as it is, even supposing the others had *not* been chosen at all."
 - c) Their being ordained to dishonor and wrath is a righteous carrying out of justice
 - (1) While the withholding of grace from "the rest" is a sovereign and unsearchable choice, the appointment of them unto wrath (1Th 5.9; 1Pet 2.8; Jude 4) and the consigning of them unto the lake of fire (Rev 20.15) is an act of justice "for their sins". Thus their sinfulness was not the cause of their being passed by, but it is indeed the cause of their being ordained and destined to damnation.
 - (2) In the withholding of grace God acts as a sovereign dispenser of His own grace and a sovereign determiner of His own will, and in the appointment to wrath He acts as a righteous Judge. In other words, God appointed them to wrath for their sins, but He rejected them in the exercise of sovereignty, Rom 9.19-23. The salvation of the elect is wholly due to the praise of His glorious grace, and the condemnation of the non-elect is to the praise of His glorious justice.

- (3) **Dick**: “There could be no will in God to punish any but sinners; nor could the intention to punish be just, without a respect to disobedience. God does not arbitrarily, or in the exercise of His sovereignty, consign any of His creatures to damnation. In a case of this nature, sheer sovereignty has no place; it is justice alone which decides; and if there were no fault, justice would inflict no suffering. It is for their sins against the law (if they lived under it alone) or for their sins also against the gospel, that they are doomed to destruction.”

G. The use and usefulness of the doctrine of election § 8

1. This final section of the Confession teaches us that the high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care. **Hodge**: “This necessity arises from the fact that it is often abused and that its proper use is in the highest degree important.”
 - a) Firstly, we ought to repress a vain curiosity about this doctrine and not attempt to be wise beyond what is written, Dt 29.29. Since it is revealed by God in His Word, it is given for our study, our preaching, and our edification. If it were a dangerous or useless doctrine God would not have revealed it to us.
 - b) However, it ought to be handled with care and prudence, avoiding human speculations, and adhering to what is plainly revealed in Scripture. **Shaw**: “When prudently discussed, it will neither lead to licentiousness nor to despair; but will eminently conduce to the knowledge, establishment, and comfort of Christians.”
2. Moreover, we are here reminded that no man can know his election prior to his conversion.
 - a) Being the purpose which God purposed intrinsically in Himself, election remains unknown until it is manifested in its execution. No man can read his own name or that of another in the Book of Life. It is a sealed book which no mortal can open. We are sure of the book and of names being written therein, but nothing can be known or conjectured until evidence is exhibited in their personal character and conduct.
 - b) Peter points out the only means by which the book’s contents can be ascertained when he exhorts Christians to “give all diligence to make their calling and election sure” (2Pet 1.10).
 - (1) If one would know his election, Peter says, let him first be sure of his calling, i.e. his conversion unto God. The operation of divine grace in the regeneration of the soul is proof that the man in whom this change is wrought was an object of the divine favor from eternity.
 - (2) The evidence of regeneration is therefore the evidence of election; without this, there is no other way of proving or knowing one’s election, Mt 7.21; Js 2.26; 1Th 1.4-5.
 - c) Since no man can know his election until he believes, it’s plain that the decree ought to have no effect upon his conduct in reference to the gospel message.
 - (1) The rule of our duty is the Word of God, not the secret counsel of God, Dt 29.29. The only subject into which we can inquire is the declaration of His will in the Scriptures, and no excuse can be drawn from the doctrine of election that will justify us in neglecting our duty to obey that will.
 - (2) God has not told us whom He has chosen to salvation, but He has told us that all to whom the gospel is preached should believe it, and that every man who does believe shall be saved, while every man who does not shall be damned. **Hodge**: “This truth ought not, moreover, to be obtruded out of its due place in the system, which includes the equally certain truths of the freedom of man and the free offers of the gospel to all.”
 - (3) Election, then, gives no discouragement to any man in reference to obeying the calls and embracing the offers of the gospel. The invitations of the gospel are not addressed to men *as elect*, but to men *as sinners* ready to perish. All who hear it are under the same obligation to comply with these invitations, and the encouragement from Christ is the same to all, “whoever comes to me, I will never cast out” (Jn 6.37).

- (4) **Hodge**: “The preceptive and not the decretive will of God is the rule of human duty. Election is first with God, and grace is consequent upon it; but with man duty and grace are first, and the inference of personal election is only consequent upon the possession of grace.... The concern of the inquirer is simply with the fact that the grace is offered and assured to him upon condition of acceptance, and with his duty to accept and improve it. Afterward, it is the great privilege of the believer to make the fact of his eternal calling and election sure by adding faith to virtue, and to virtue knowledge, etc.; for if he does these things he shall never fall, 2Pet 1.5-10.”
3. It is our duty to consider the doctrine of predestination as one more item to the praise of the glory of God’s grace. We are called by it to stand in awe of a God whose mercy is from everlasting to everlasting, for those who fear Him, and whose justice is a consuming and eternal fire for all those who stand guilty before Him.
- H. Although the decree of God is not a rule of conduct to us, it is not a barren speculation either. It is calculated to awaken sentiments of piety and gratitude, and it is represented as furnishing ample grounds of admiration, gratitude, consolation, and hope to believers.
1. It exhibits God in the august character of the supreme Lord of the universe, who does according to His will and whose arm none can stay.
 - a) In view in predestination is His absolute sway over His creatures as fallen in sin. They were all before His eyes in a state of pollution and under a sentence of death. He was able to do with them what He would and what He has chosen to do was according to His good pleasure.
 - b) He did not leave them all under their doom, nor did He extend His mercy to all; but He distinguished between them when there was *no* distinction between them, saying to some, “You shall live,” and to others, “You shall die”. His will is the law and from His sentence there is no appeal, because He was absolutely free in making it, Rom 9.20-23.
 - c) And should we not stand in awe of such a God, who was pleased to make us vessels of honor when He could have made us vessels of wrath?
 2. It affords us an illustration of the exceeding riches of His grace. In the destination of a portion of fallen humanity to the enjoyment of everlasting happiness, God appears in the character of the God of love (Eph 1.5-6; 1Jn 4.19).
 - a) This love is of the purest kind, for not only were there no qualities in the elect to attract it, but everything in them was repulsive.
 - b) Moreover, it is all the more precious given that it dates from before the foundation of the world, arising in the heart of God as soon as our need arose in His mind, and being just as immediately answered with the decision to appoint His only Son as our Mediator, knowing full well what it would cost Him.
 3. It gives a solemn and impressive view of His justice and severity.
 - a) The damnation of so many of the human race is proof that God is holy and just and that sin is contrary to His nature and the object of His eternal abhorrence.
 - b) Moreover, the doctrine of reprobation proves that as full as His heart is of benevolence and mercy to His creatures, the honor of His own character and government is dearer to Him than their happiness, Ex 34.6-7.
- I. In conclusion:
1. **Swinnock**: “When men tax the decrees of God, as if they were unrighteous, partial, and ordered with respect of persons, they then compare themselves with God, as if, in case they had been at heaven’s council-table when all things were debated and concluded, there should have been more mild and moderate, more just and righteous resolves and conclusions. These men think and speak evil of the things they understand not; and it would become them better to mind faith and repentance, and ensure their effectual calling, than pry into or meddle with those secrets of heaven. No man has a line long enough to measure God by; His eternal works and ways are

beyond all our understandings and apprehensions, and so much fitter for our admiration than curious disquisition, Rom 9.17-24.”

2. **Dick:** “It can serve no great purpose to muster up objections against the infallibility of the Divine decrees, or the responsibility of man; to listen to them when proposed by others; to revolve them in our minds; to perplex ourselves with attempts to answer them, and to allow ourselves to be disquieted and to doubt because our endeavors are not successful. Although we should prove to our satisfaction, as many have done to theirs, that the decrees of God are not absolute, or that man is not free, all that we have gained is to confirm our minds in the belief of a *falsehood*; for both doctrines must be true, as they are expressly declared in the Scriptures. To their authority let us bow, and by their decision let us regulate our thoughts and our conduct.

“If we still oppose our reasonings to their dictates, we must take our course; but let us beware lest we dispute ourselves into infidelity or atheism, and seek a refuge from our doubts *in the rejection of revelation*, because it inculcates truths which to us appear contradictory, *or in the cheerless conclusion*, that we live in a fatherless world, where chance bears sway, that man is the phantom of an hour, the sport of accident and passion, and that, as he knows not whence he came, so he cannot tell whither he is going.

“In opposition to this comfortless and impious conclusion, let us hold fast the creed which is consonant to reason as well as to revelation, that the Supreme Being manages the affairs of the universe which He created; that all creatures are dependent upon Him, and all events are subject to His control; that while good men obey Him from choice, the wrath and wayward passions of the bad are subservient to His design; that, while His almighty power bends them to His purpose, He is a moral Governor and Judge, whose righteousness will be displayed in punishing transgressors, even for those actions which were the means of executing his own decrees.”

Bibliography:

An Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith, Robert Shaw

The Confession of Faith, A. A. Hodge

Confessing the Faith, Chad Van Dixhoorn

A Summary of Christian Doctrine, Louis Berkhof

Lectures on Theology, John Dick

George Swinnock, Works, Vol. 4

Assignments:

*Read the chapter in Hodge entitled “Of God’s Eternal Decree”—the questions at the end of the chapter should be used as a review, to make sure you understand the contents of the chapter.

*Read Chapter III in the WCF, paying close attention to the Scripture proofs

*Memorize Shorter Catechism questions 7-8

*Memorize:

On God’s decree in general: Eph 1.11; Ps 33.11; Isa 46.10; Acts 2.23; Rom 13.48

On predestination: Eph 1.4-5; Rom 11.5; Rom 9.13, 18; 2Thes 2.13

—The next class will meet at 8AM on 7 February to study the doctrine of Creation (WCF IV)