

# God's Eternal Decree

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Institutes of  
Theology

# The Five Primacy Explanations for What Happens in our World

1. Natural Processes (naturalistic determinism)
2. Fate (fatalism or determinism)
3. Random Chance (Casualism)
4. Self-determinism
5. God's Sovereignty



# I. Definitions

**Westminster Shorter Catechism (Q. 7):** "the decrees of God are his eternal purpose, according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he hath foreordained whatsoever come to pass."

**F.H. Klooster (Ev. Dict. Of Theology):** "a theological term for the comprehensive plan for the world and its history which God sovereignly established in eternity."

**Berkhof:** "God has sovereignly determined from all eternity whatsoever will come to pass, and works his sovereign will in His entire creation, both natural and spiritual, according to His predetermined plan."

**MacArthur, Biblical Doctrine:** "God's decree is his eternal plan, whereby, according to his decretive will and for his glory, he foreordained everything that comes to pass."



# I. Definitions

**Westminster Confession:** "God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: (Eph. 1:11; Rom. 11:33; Heb. 6:17; Rom. 9:15,18) yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, (Jam. 1:13,17; 1 Jn. 1:5) nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established (Acts 2:23; Mt. 17:12; Acts 4:27,28; Jn. 19:11; Pr. 16:33)."

"Although God knows whatsoever may or can come to pass upon all supposed conditions (Acts 15:18; 1 Sam. 23:11,12; Mt. 11:21,23), yet hath he not decreed anything because he foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions (Rom. 9:11,13,16,18)."



# I. Definitions

What They All Have in Common...

1. God decided
2. Before creation
3. About absolutely everything



# I. Definitions

**John Frame:** "The decree is God's purpose in eternity; creation, providence, and redemption are the execution of his decree in time."

**Jonathan Edwards:** "Whether God has decreed all things that ever come to pass or not, all that own the being of a God, own that He knows all things beforehand. Now it is self-evident that if He knows all things beforehand, He either doth approve of them or doth not approve of them; that is, He either is willing they should be, or He is not willing they should be. But to will that they should be is to decree them."



# God's Will

- 1. God's moral will** (will of precept or command) – commands and laws God lays down for His creatures which demand obedience, but which man often disobeys.
- 2. God's sovereign will** (will of decree) – the eternal, unchangeable, and immutable plan of God which is always carried out in human history.



# The Ultimate Purpose

## The Glory of God!

- Creation
  - Ps. 19:1
  - Rev. 4:11
- Redemption
  - Rom. 11:33-36
  - Eph. 1:6, 12, 14



## II. Biblical Arguments

- Ps. 103:19 - "The LORD has established His throne in the heavens, And His sovereignty rules over all.
- Ps. 115:3 - "Our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases.
- Ps. 135:6 - "Whatever the LORD pleases, He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps."
- Dan. 4:35 - "All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, But He does according to His will in the host of heaven And among the inhabitants of earth; And no one can ward off His hand Or say to Him, 'What have You done?'"
- Is. 44:6-8



## II. Biblical Arguments

- **Is. 46:10-11** - "Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, 'My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure'; 11 Calling a bird of prey from the east, The man of My purpose from a far country. Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it."
- **Acts 2:23** - "This Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death."



## II. Biblical Arguments

- **Rom. 8:28** - "We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.
- **Rom. 11:36** - "From Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.
- **1 Cor. 15:27** - "HE HAS PUT ALL THINGS IN SUBJECTION UNDER HIS FEET. But when He says, 'All things are put in subjection,' it is evident that He is excepted who put all things in subjection to Him."



## II. Biblical Arguments

- Eph. 3:11 - “This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord.”
- Eph. 1:9-11



# III. Characteristics

- A. One
- B. Comprehensive
- C. Free or Unconditional
- D. Eternal
- E. Wise
- F. Immutable
- G. Efficacious



# A. One

- Eph. 1:11 - “the *counsel* of His will” (singular)
- It’s a unit.
- It’s better to think of God’s decree or plan, rather than His decrees or plans.
- **Berkhof:** “There is, therefore, no series of decrees in God, but simply one comprehensive plan, embracing all that comes to pass.”



# B. Comprehensive

- 1) All Events (Eph. 1:10-11; Acts 15:18; Is. 46:10; Rom. 8:28)
- 2) All Creation (Job 37:12-13; Ps. 104:14; 148:8; Mt. 6:26,30; 10:29)
- 3) The Empires, Nations, and Rulers of History (Ps. 22:28; Pr. 21:1; Dan. 2:21; Acts 17:26)
- 4) Accidental or Insignificant Events (Pr. 16:33; Mt. 10:29)
- 5) Events that Seem Contingent (Gen. 45:8; 50:20; Pr. 16:33)



# B. Comprehensive

- 6) The Length and Circumstances of Our Lives (Job 14:5; Ps. 39:4; 130:6)
- 7) The Needs of Life (Acts 14:17; Jam. 1:17)
- 8) The Free, Righteous Acts of Man (Eph. 2:10)
- 9) The Free, Wicked Acts of Man (Ps. 76:10; Pr. 16:4; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28)
- 10) The Sacrificial Death of His Son (Acts 2:23; 4:28; 1 Pet. 1:18-20)



# B. Comprehensive

- 11) The Salvation of the Elect (Rom. 9:11; Eph. 1:4; 1 Cor. 2:7; 2 Tim. 1:9)
- 12) The Exaltation of His Son (Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:9-10; Eph. 3:21; Col. 1:16-18)
- 13) The Means as Well as the Ends (Ps. 119:89-91; Rom. 10:13-15; Eph. 1:4; 2 Th. 2:13)



# C. Free or Unconditional

- Moved solely by God's own pleasure
- Entirely uninfluenced by anything outside of Himself
  - **Is. 40:13-14** - "Who has directed the Spirit of the LORD, Or as His counselor has informed Him? With whom did He consult and who gave Him understanding? And who taught Him in the path of justice and taught Him knowledge And informed Him of the way of understanding?"
  - **Dan. 4:35a** - "All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, But He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth."
  - **Eph. 1:11** - "Having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will."



# D. Eternal

- Decided in eternity past
- Entirely uninfluenced by anything outside of Himself
  - **Acts 15:18** - “THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM LONG AGO.”
  - **Eph. 1:4** - “He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him.”
  - **2 Tim. 1:9** - “[God] has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity.”
- Contrary to openness theism: “God does not infallibly know the future or the free actions of men.”



# E. Wise

- Eph. 3:10-11 - “So that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly *places*. *This was* in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord.”
- Pr. 3:19 - “The LORD by wisdom founded the earth, by understanding He established the heavens.”



# F. Immutable

- Because God's Nature is Immutable
- **Heb. 1:10-12** - "YOU, LORD, IN THE BEGINNING LAID THE FOUNDATION OF THE EARTH, AND THE HEAVENS ARE THE WORKS OF YOUR HANDS; THEY WILL PERISH, BUT YOU REMAIN; AND THEY ALL WILL BECOME OLD LIKE A GARMENT, AND LIKE A MANTLE YOU WILL ROLL THEM UP; LIKE A GARMENT THEY WILL ALSO BE CHANGED. BUT YOU ARE THE SAME, AND YOUR YEARS WILL NOT COME TO AN END."
- **Heb. 13:8** - "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."
- **Jam. 1:17** - "Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow."



# F. Immutable

- Because God's nature is immutable, His eternal plan cannot change...
  - **Job 23:13-14** - "He is unique and who can turn Him? And what His soul desires, that He does. For He performs what is appointed for me, and many such decrees are with Him."
  - **Is. 14:24** - "The LORD of hosts has sworn saying, "Surely, just as I have intended so it has happened, and just as I have planned so it will stand."
  - **Heb. 6:17-18** - "God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us."



# G. Efficacious

- Infallibly determines the certainty of the events He decreed
- He will not change His plan, and nothing and no one can alter His eternal decree...
  - Job 42:2 - “I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.”
  - Ps. 33:10-11 - “The LORD nullifies the counsel of the nations; He frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation.”
  - Pr. 19:21 - “Many plans are in a man’s heart, but the counsel of the LORD will stand.”



# G. Efficacious

- **Is. 14:27** - “The LORD of hosts has planned, and who can frustrate it? And as for His stretched-out hand, who can turn it back?”
- **Is. 46:10-11** - “Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure.’ ... Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it.”
- **Dan. 4:35b** - “No one can ward off His hand Or say to Him, ‘What have You done?’”
- **Eph. 1:11** - “[He] works all things after the counsel of His will.”



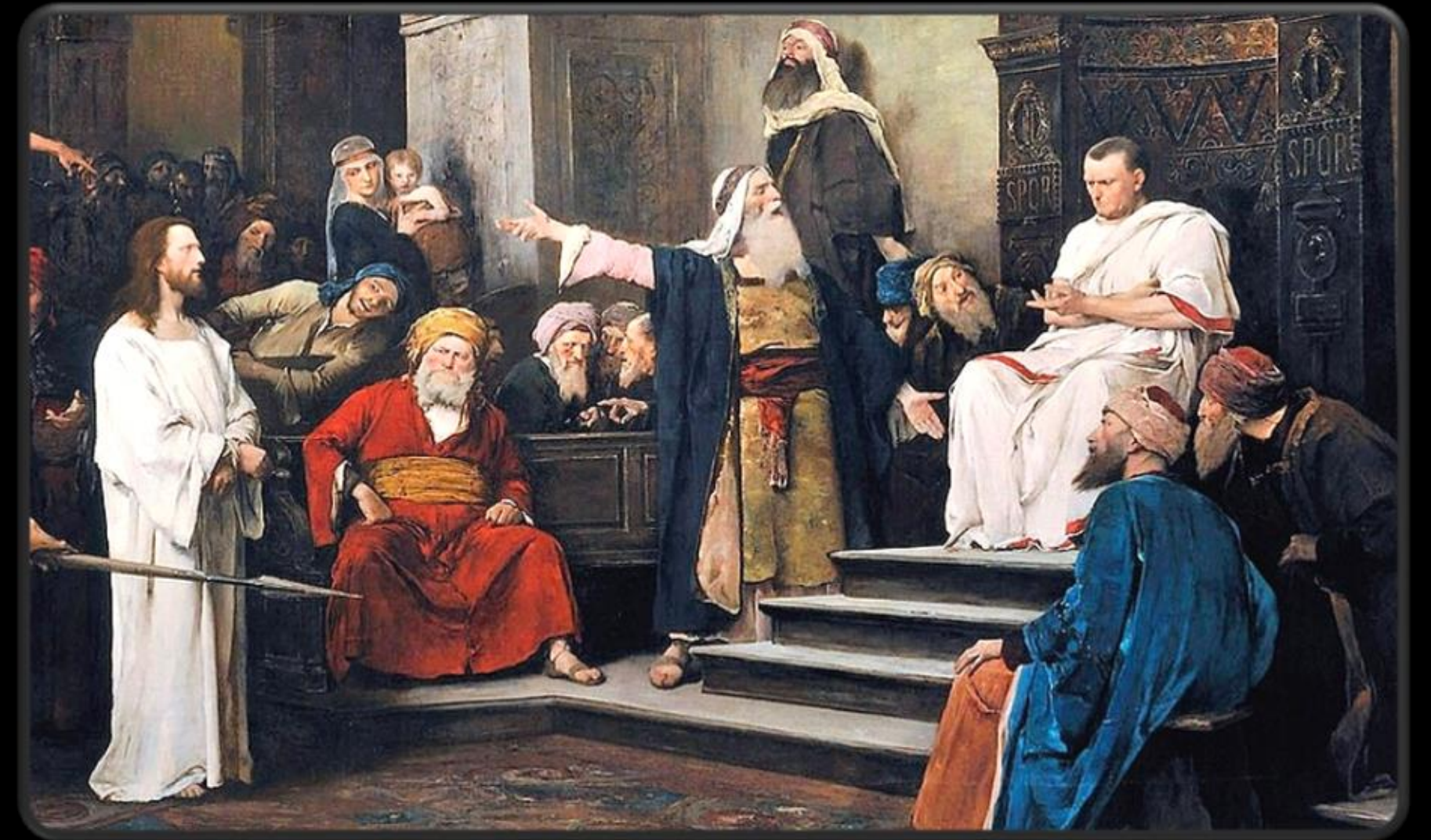
# G. Efficacious

- 1) God's **Directive Decree** – God determined to effect these outcomes either through necessary causes or His own actions.
  - He is the author—and acts alone.
  - He directly brings these things about.
    - He created all things by Himself alone (Is. 45:18).
    - He established human government (Dan. 2:21).
    - He raised Christ from the dead (Rom. 10:9).



# G. Efficacious

- 2) **God's Permissive Decree** – God determined to allow created free agents to effect.



# A Biblical Example of God's Permissive Decree

- **Lk. 22:22** - "For indeed, the Son of Man is going as it has been determined; but woe to that man by whom He is betrayed!"
- **Acts 2:23** - "this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.
- **Acts 4:27-28** - "For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, 28 to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.



# Man's Sin & God's Eternal Decree

- 1) God does not act *upon* or *in* our wills to cause the sin.
- 2) Man's sin is not passively permitted, in the sense that it is out of God's control or separate from His plan.
- 3) God's decree renders every sinful act absolutely certain.
- 4) But God simply determined...
  - a) Not to hinder the sinful choices of the creature's will
  - b) To direct and control the results of the sinner's choices to accomplish His own purposes



# IV. Objections to the Eternal Decree

A. “It violates man’s free will.”

- Cf. Rom. 8:7-8

B. “It’s inconsistent with human responsibility.”

- Cf. Acts 27:22, 31; Rom. 20:13-15

C. “It makes God the author of sin.”

- Cf. Ps. 92:15; Eccl. 7:29; Jam. 1:13; Jn. 1:5)



# The Crucifixion of Jesus

1. Sinful men were responsible—they were the immediate or proximate cause...
  - Acts 4:27 - "Truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel,"
  - Acts 2:23 - "This Man, ... you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death."
  - Acts 2:36 - "Jesus whom you crucified."



# The Crucifixion of Jesus

1. Sinful men were responsible—they were the immediate or proximate cause...
2. It happened by God's eternal decree—He was the ultimate cause...
  - Acts 2:23 - "This Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death."
  - Acts 4:27-28 - "Truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur."



# Edwards' Explanation of the Eternal Decree

"[It is consistent to say] that God has decreed every action of men, yea, every action that they do that is sinful, and every circumstance of those actions; [that] he determines that they shall be in every respect as they afterwards are; [that] he determines that there shall be such actions, and so obtains that they shall be so sinful as they are; and yet that God does not decree the actions that are sinful as sinful, but decrees [them] as good.... [B]y decreeing an action as sinful, I mean decreeing [it] for the sake of the sinfulness of the action. God decrees that it shall be sinful for the sake of the good that he causes to arise from the sinfulness thereof, whereas man decrees it for the sake of the evil that is in it."



# V. The Application

- Causes us to stand in awe of God (Rom. 11:33-36)
- Demolishes all human pride (Pr. 19:21; Jam. 4:13-17)
- Encourages us to trust God with our lives (Ps. 33:10-11)
- Makes us thankful for all God's blessings (Ps. 103:2; 1 Th. 5:18)
- Allows us to remain calm in the most troubling circumstances (Gen. 50:20; Rom. 8:28)
- Gives us great peace in making decisions in life (Pr. 16:9)
- Ensures the fulfillment of all prophecy and promise (Is. 14:24-27)



