

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

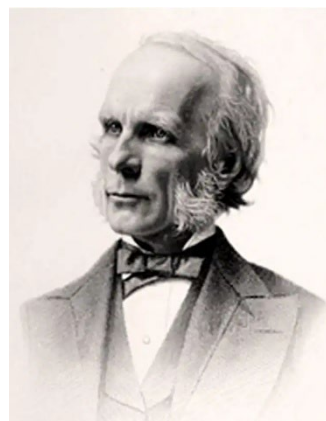
Efficacious and Permissive Decrees

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1

The divine decrees are divided into efficacious and permissive (cf. Turretin 3.12.21–25).

The efficacious decree determines the event: (a) by physical and material causes; such events are the motions of the heavenly bodies and the phenomena of the material world generally: “He made a decree for the rain and a way for the lightning of the thunder” (Job 28:26); (b) by an immediate spiritual agency of God upon the finite will in the origin and continuance of holiness: “For it is God, who works in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13); “faith is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8); “if God peradventure will give them repentance” (2 Tim. 2:25); “created in Christ Jesus unto good works” (Eph. 2:10); “the new man is created in righteousness” (4:24).



The permissive decree relates only to moral evil. Sin is the sole and solitary object of this species of decree. It renders the event infallibly certain, but not by immediately acting upon and in the finite will, as in the case of the efficacious decree. God does not work in man or angel “to will and to do,” when man or angel wills and acts antagonistically to him: “Who in times past suffered (*eiase*)⁸ all nations to walk in their own ways” (Acts 14:16); “the times of this ignorance God overlooked (*hyperidōn*)”⁹ (17:30); “he gave them their own desire” (Ps. 78:18); “he gave them their own request” (106:15) (Shedd, *History of Doctrine* 2.135–38). As sin constitutes only a small sphere in comparison with the whole universe, the scope of the permissive decree is very limited compared with that of the efficient decree. Sin is an endless evil, but fills only a corner of the universe. Hell (*Hölle*) is a hole or “pit.” It is deep but not wide, bottomless but not boundless. (See supplement 3.6.6.)

⁸ εἶασε

⁹ ὑπεριδών

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The permissive decree is a decree (a) not to hinder the sinful self-determination of the finite will and (b) to regulate and control the result of the sinful self-determination. "God's permissive will," says Howe (*Decrees*, lect. 1), "is his will to permit whatsoever he thinks fit to permit or not to hinder; while what he so wills or determines so to permit, he intends also to regulate and not to behold as an idle unconcerned spectator, but to dispose all those *permissa*¹⁰ unto wise and great ends of his own." It should be observed that in permitting sin, God permits what he forbids. The permissive decree is not indicative of what God approves and is pleasing to him. God decrees what he hates and abhors when he brings sin within the scope of his universal plan (Calvin 1.18.3–4). The "good pleasure" (*eudokia*)¹¹ in accordance with which God permits sin must not be confounded with the pleasure or complacency (*agapē*)¹² in accordance with which he promulgates the moral law forbidding sin. The term *good pleasure* has the meaning of *pleasure* in the phrase *be pleased* or *please to do me this favor*. What is asked for is a decision to do the favor. The performance of the favor may involve pain, not pleasure; it may require a sacrifice of pleasure on the part of the one who is to "be pleased" to do it. Again, when the permissive decree is denominated the divine will, the term *Will* is employed in the narrow sense of volition, not in the wide sense of inclination. The will of God, in this case, is only a particular decision in order to some ulterior end. This particular decision, considered in itself, may be contrary to the abiding inclination and desire of God as founded in his holy nature; as when a man by a volition decides to perform a particular act which in itself is unpleasant in order to attain an ulterior end that is agreeable. Again, in saying that sin is in accordance with the divine will, the term *Will* implies "control." As when we say of a physician, "the disease is wholly at his will." This does not mean that the physician takes pleasure in willing the disease, but that he can cure it.

This brings to notice the principal practical value of the doctrine that God decrees sin. It establishes divine sovereignty over the entire universe. By reason of his permissive decree, God has absolute control over moral evil, while yet he is not the author of it and forbids it. Unless he permitted sin, it could not come to pass. Should he decide to preserve the will of the holy angel or the holy man from lapsing, the man or the angel would persevere in holiness. Sin is preventable by almighty God, and therefore he is sovereign over sin and hell, as well as over holiness and heaven. This is the truth which God taught to Cyrus to contradict the Persian dualism: "I form the light and create darkness; I make peace and create evil. I, the Lord, do all these things" (Isa. 45:7); "shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord has not done it?" (Amos 3:6); "I withheld you from sinning against me" (Gen. 20:6). To deny this truth logically leads to the doctrine of the independence of evil,

¹⁰ permitted things

¹¹ εὐδοκία

¹² ἀγάπη

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and the doctrine of the independence of evil is dualism and irreconcilable with monotheism. Evil becomes like the *hylē*¹³ in the ancient physics, a limitation of the infinite being. The truth respecting the efficacious and the permissive decree is finely expressed in the verse of George Herbert:

We all acknowledge both thy power and love
To be exact, transcendent, and divine;
Who dost so strongly and so sweetly move,
While all things have their will—yet none but thine.
For either thy command, or thy permission
Lays hands on all; they are thy right and left.
The first puts on with speed and expedition;
The other curbs sin's stealing pace and theft.
Nothing escapes them both; all must appear,
And be disposed, and dressed, and tuned by thee,
Who sweetly temper'st all. If we could hear
Thy skill and art, what music it would be.

3

In purposing to permit sin, God purposes to overrule it for good: "Surely the wrath of man shall praise you; the remainder of wrath shall you restrain" (Ps. 76:10); "you thought evil against me, but God meant it unto good" (Gen. 45:8). This part of the doctrine of the permissive decree may be overlooked or denied, and an inadequate statement result. The Council of Trent asserted that sin arises from the "mere permission" of God. The Reformers were not satisfied with this phraseology, because they understood it to mean that in respect to the fall of angels and men, God is an idle spectator (*deo otioso spectante*) and that sin came into the universe because he cannot prevent it and has no control over it. This kind of permission is referred to in Westminster Confession 5.4: "The almighty power, wisdom, and goodness of God extends even to the sins of angels and men; and this not by a bare permission, but such as has joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding and otherwise ordering and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to his own holy ends; yet so that the sinfulness thereof proceeds only from the creature and not from God."¹⁴ Anselm (*Why the God-Man?* 1.15) illustrates this truth in the following manner:

¹³ ὕλη = matter

¹⁴ WS: Calvin is sometimes represented as differing from Augustine and teaching that God decrees sin as he does holiness by an efficacious decree. Möhler so asserts in his *Symbolics*, but Baur (*Gegensatz*, 744–45) shows that this is a mistake. Modern Lutheran theologians often make the same assertion. Fisher (*Reformation*, 202) says that in his *Institutes* Calvin "makes the primal transgression the object of an efficient decree," but "in the *Consensus Genevensis* confines himself to the assertion of a permissive decree

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If those things which are held together in the circuit of the heavens should desire to be elsewhere than under the heavens or to be further removed from the heavens, there is no place where they can be but under the heavens; nor can they fly from the heavens without also approaching them. For whence and whither and in what way they go, they still are under the heavens; and if they are at a greater distance from one part of them, they are only so much nearer to the opposite part. And so, though man or evil angel refuse to submit to the divine will and appointment, yet he cannot escape it; for if he wishes to fly from a will that commands, he falls into the power of a will that punishes. (See supplement 3.6.7.)

Man may not permit sin because he is under a command that forbids him to commit it, either in himself or in others. But God is not thus obliged by the command of a superior to hinder the created will from self-determining to evil. He was bound by his own justice and equity to render it possible that man should not self-determine to evil; and he did this in creating man in holiness and with plenary power to continue holy. But he was not bound in justice and equity to make it infallibly certain that man would not self-determine to evil. He was obliged by his own perfection to give man so much spiritual power that he might stand if he would, but not obliged to give so much additional power as to prevent him from falling by his own decision. Mutable perfection in a creature was all that justice required. Immutable perfection was something more (cf. Charnock, *Holiness of God*, 496). We cannot infer that because it is the duty of a man to keep his fellowman from sinning, if he can, it is also the duty of God to keep man from sinning. A man is bound to exert every influence in his power to prevent the free will of his fellow creature from disobeying God, only because God has commanded him to do so, not because the fellowman is entitled to it. A criminal cannot demand upon the ground of justice that his fellowman keep him from the commission of crime; and still less can he

in the case of the first sin." But Calvin 3.23.8 affirms that "the perdition of the wicked depends upon divine predestination in such a manner that the cause and matter of it are found in themselves. Man falls according to the appointment of divine providence, but he falls by his own fault (*suo vitio cadit*)."¹ Calvin, it is true, asserts (2.4.3–5) that "prescience or permission" is not the whole truth respecting God's relation to sin, because he is said in Scripture "to blind and harden the reprobate and to turn, incline, and influence their hearts." But the accompanying explanation shows that he has in mind the notion of permission in the case of an idle spectator who cannot prevent an action and can do nothing toward controlling it after it has occurred—the same notion that is alluded to in the Westminster Confession and other Calvinistic creeds. The "blinding, hardening, turning," etc., Calvin describes as the consequence of divine desertion, not causation. Some of his phraseology in this place is harsh, but should be interpreted in harmony with his explicit teaching in 3.23.8. One proof that Calvinism does not differ from Augustinianism on the subject of the origin of sin under the divine decree is the fact that the Dort Canons, which are a very strict statement of Calvinism, reject supralapsarianism and assert infralapsarianism/sublapsarianism. This means that the relation of God to the origin of sin is not efficacious, but permissive, which was Augustine's view.

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make this demand upon God. The criminal cannot say to one who could have prevented him from the transgression, but did not: "You are to blame for this crime, because you did not prevent me from perpetrating it." Nonprevention of crime is not the authorship of crime. No free agent can demand as something due to him that another free agent exert an influence to prevent the wrong use of his own free agency. The only reason, therefore, why one is obligated to prevent another from sinning is the command of one who is superior to them both. God has made every man his "brother's keeper." And if God were man's fellow creature, he also would be his brother's keeper and would be obligated to prevent sin. In creating man holy and giving him plenary power to persevere in holiness, God has done all that equity requires in reference to the prevention of sin in a moral agent.

5

How the permissive decree can make the origin of sin a certainty is an inscrutable mystery. God is not the author of sin, and hence, if its origination is a certainty for him, it must be by a method that does not involve his causation. There are several attempts at explanation, but they are inadequate:

1. God exerts positive efficiency upon the finite will, as he does in the origination of holiness. He makes sin certain by causing it. But this contradicts the following texts: "Neither tempts he any man" (James 1:13); "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5); "God made man upright, but they have sought out many inventions" (Eccles. 7:29). It also contradicts the Christian consciousness. In the instance of holiness, the soul says, "Not unto me, but unto you be the glory"; but in the instance of sin, it says, "Not unto you, but unto me be the guilt and shame." "By the grace of God, I am what I am" in respect to holiness; "by the fault of free will, I am what I am" in respect to sin.
2. God places the creature in such circumstances as render his sinning certain. But the will of the creature is not subject to circumstances. It can resist them. Circumstances act only *ab extra*.¹⁵ The conversion of the will cannot be accounted for by circumstances, and neither can its apostasy.
3. God presents motives to the will. But a motive derives its motive power from the existing inclination or bias of the will. There is no certainty of action in view of a motive, unless the previous inclination of the will agrees with the motive; and the motive cannot produce this inclination or bias.
4. God decides not to bestow that special degree of grace which prevents apostasy. But this does not make apostasy certain, because holy Adam had power to stand with that

¹⁵ from the outside

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degree of grace with which his Creator had already endowed him. It was, indeed, not certain that he would stand; but neither was it certain that he would fall, if reference be had only to the degree of grace given in creation. When God decides not to hinder a holy being from sinning, he is inactive in this reference; and inaction is not causative.

5. God causes the matter but not the form of sin. There is a difference between the act and the viciousness of the act. The act of casting stones when Achan was slain was the same act materially as when Stephen was martyred; but the formal element, namely, the intention, was totally different. God concurs with the act and causes it, but not with the intent or viciousness of the act. But the form or “viciousness” of the act is the whole of the sin; and God’s concursus does not extend to this (cf. Charnock’s *Holiness of God* on the divine concursus). Charnock regards it as a valid explanation of the permissive decree.^{16 17}



William G. T. Shedd (1820–1894), one of the eminent theologians of his era, was a thoroughgoing Calvinist and church historian. As an Old School Presbyterian he held fast to the Westminster Standards. Shedd appropriated many of the leading intellectual trends of the nineteenth century without sacrificing his commitment to Reformed orthodoxy. He served as Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York for more than sixteen years. He was a representative of the flowering of Calvinist theology in the US the middle of the nineteenth century (alongside other such noteworthy theologians as Charles Hodge) and wrote as an heir to the long and rigorous tradition of Reformed scholasticism, and of Princeton’s great philosopher-theologian Jonathan Edwards.

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¹⁶ WS: Alexander in the 1831 *Princeton Repertory* makes the same objection as above to the doctrine of the concursus.

¹⁷ Shedd, W. G. T. (2003). *Dogmatic theology*. (A. W. Gomes, Ed.) (3rd ed.). Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 318-322. Public Domain.