

THE AUTHOR OF SIN

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Previous edition published in 2005.

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1. The Author of Sin

When Reformed Christians are questioned on whether God is the "author of sin," they are too quick to say, "No, God is not the author of sin." And then they twist and turn and writhe on the floor, trying to give man some power of "self-determination,"¹ and some kind of freedom that in their minds would render man culpable,² and yet still leave God with total sovereignty.

On the other hand, when someone alleges that my view of divine sovereignty makes God the author of sin, my reaction is "So what?" Those who oppose me stupidly chant, "But he makes God the author of sin, he makes God the author of sin." However, a description does not amount to an argument or objection, and I have never come across a decent explanation as to what is wrong with God being the author of sin in any theological or philosophical work written by anybody from any perspective.

The truth is that, whether or not God is the author of sin, there is no biblical or rational problem with him being the author of sin. For it to be a problem, it must make some point of Christianity false, or contradict some passage of Scripture. But if God is the author of sin, how does it make Christianity false? One must construct an argument showing this by citing established premises that necessarily lead to the conclusion that Christianity would be false if God is the author of sin. What is this argument? And what passage of Scripture does it contradict? You can cite any passage you want, but you have to show that it necessarily applies to the question and makes it impossible for God to be the author of sin. Where is this passage of Scripture?

Among the many fallacious replies is the appeal to James 1:13.³ Using this verse to deny that God is the author of sin is one of the worst misapplications of Scripture, and because this error is very popular and influential, it has caused much damage and generated an unnecessary burden for those who would defend the faith.

Consider the context. James is discussing the practical outworking of the Christian's faith in his letter, and so he often stresses the Christian's direct responsibility, and from the Christian's immediate perspective. James is pointing out what the Christian should consider and address in his struggles as a Christian – he is not dealing with metaphysics. In other words, he is addressing his topics from the standpoint of a Christian relative to his immediate considerations and responsibilities, and not relative to broad metaphysical principles.

¹ See Hodge, Dabney, Shedd, etc.

² But as I have repeatedly said, there is no established connection between freedom and culpability.

³ "When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed" (James 1:13-14).

However, when we are discussing divine sovereignty vs. human freedom, cause and effect, etc., we are indeed dealing with metaphysics. Of course, the conclusions reached on this level carry necessary implications for practical living, and what the Bible teaches about metaphysics and practical living are completely consistent with each other. Nevertheless, it is true that as long as the discussion remains on the metaphysical level, the reference point is different, so that one must be careful not to invalidly infer a metaphysical principle from a verse of practical instruction.

With this in mind, read the passage again. It does not affirm or deny whether God is the author of sin – it does not address the topic, but its concerns are different. It tells you that God is not the tempter, which is different from saying that God is not the author of sin.

That is, if God directly causes you to sin, it indeed makes him the "author" of sin, but the "sinner" or "wrongdoer" is still you. Since sin is the transgression of divine law, for God to be a sinner or wrongdoer in this case, he must decree a moral law that forbids himself to be the author of sin, and then when he acts as the author of sin anyway, he becomes a sinner or wrongdoer.

Unless this happens, for God to be the author of sin does not make him a sinner or wrongdoer. The terms "author," "sinner," "wrongdoer," and "tempter" are precise – at least precise enough to be distinguished from one another, and for God to be the "author" of sin says nothing about whether he is also a "sinner," "wrongdoer," or a "tempter." And for one not to be a wrongdoer by definition means that he has not done wrong. Therefore, even if God is the author of sin, it does not automatically follow that there is anything wrong with it, or that he is a wrongdoer.

However, this is not to distance God from evil, for to "author" the sin implies far more control over the sinner and the sin than to merely tempt. Whereas the devil (or a person's lust) may be the tempter, and the person might be the sinner, it is God who directly and completely controls both the tempter and the sinner, and the relationship between them. And although God is not himself the tempter, he deliberately and sovereignly sends evil spirits to tempt (1 Kings 22:19–23) and to torment (1 Samuel 16:14–23, 18:10, 19:9). But in all of this, God is righteous by definition.

The verse is telling you that when you deal with temptation, you must directly address your lust, and not just blame God and then do nothing, or remain in your sin. Read all of James 1 and see if this is not his obvious emphasis. He deals with joy, faith, perseverance, doubt, pride, lust, anger, moral filth, and being a doer of the Word. He is dealing with the Christian's direct responsibilities in practical living, and he does this by relating it to the internal motives and characteristics of the person.

In verse 13, he is instructing the believer on how to rightly approach a temptation – he is not trying to explain the metaphysics behind it. Or, he is considering the believer's responsibility concerning the inner factors in sanctification, and not the metaphysical cause or principle for these. But the metaphysical cause or principle is exactly what we are discussing when we consider whether God is the author of sin. Therefore, James 1:13 is

not directly applicable to our topic. If one still wishes to deny that God is the author of sin, he will have to use another verse.

Those who cite James 1 to assert that God cannot be the author of sin might use verse 17⁴ to reinforce their understanding of verse 13; however, if verse 17 is interpreted in a way that is consistent with their interpretation of verse 13, then this would make verse 17 contradict Isaiah 45:7.⁵ But if verse 17 is correctly interpreted so that it does not contradict Isaiah 45:7, then it no longer reinforces their false interpretation of verse 13. Thus nothing in this passage denies that God is the author of sin.

The motive and effect of the Reformed answer is to accommodate human standards of fairness and righteousness. Dabney, Shedd, and others admitted that their answer is meant to satisfy human intuition. If not for the fact that God's absolute sovereignty is repugnant to sinful human intuition, made defective by the noetic effects of sin, the "author of sin" question would have no logical entry point into theological discussions.

In contrast, the biblical approach to this type of questions and objections is not to justify God, but to rebuke man for making the challenge in the first place.

Our passage from Isaiah 45 is one example:

I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God...I am the LORD, and there is no other.

I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things....

Does the clay say to the potter, "What are you making?" Does your work say, "He has no hands"?

Woe to him who says to his father, "What have you begotten?" or to his mother, "What have you brought to birth?"

In other words, "I am the only God. Whether it is prosperity or disaster, I am the doer of all these things – there is not another God to do them. How dare you question me about this? Who are you to object?"

Although this verse might not settle every detail, unlike James 1:13, it is relevant to metaphysics. He is the only God, and this is inseparably connected to the fact that it is this one and only God who causes "all these things," including both prosperity and disaster. He

⁴ "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows."

⁵ "I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things."

is the doer of them all. This is a denial of any type of dualism – there is not another power that can cause prosperity or disaster.⁶

Contrary to the traditional explanation, God does not say, "Oh, no, I am not the author of sin. Although I am the ultimate cause of all things, I distance myself from directly causing evil by establishing secondary causes and free agents. So although I create and sustain all things, men freely sin by thinking and acting according to their own dispositions. The evil dispositions come from Adam. As for how Adam got his evil dispositions...well, it will just have to remain a mystery for you." If this is the answer, why not jump right to the mystery and save us all some time?

The Bible never responds this way. There are many passages saying that God causes all things, and the metaphysics behind it is explained by God's omnipotence – the same omnipotence that created everything. On the other hand, all the passages that people use to deny that God is the author of sin or to prove compatibilism are always mere descriptions of events and motives, without dealing with the metaphysical cause of those events and motives.

Instead of giving the popular answer, which is weak, evasive, incoherent, and confusing, God unashamedly declares, "Yes, I do all these things. What are you going to do about it? Who are you to even ask me about it?" When it comes to metaphysics, including God's relationship to human decisions, whether for good or for evil, this is how the Bible responds.

Then, we read from Romans 9:19–21:

One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?"

But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'"

Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?

Again, this has something to do with metaphysics (determinism, freedom, etc.), since the context has to do with election and reprobation, and the making of the elect and the non-elect, as the potter makes pottery out of clay.

Contrary to the typical response, Paul does not say, "You do not understand. Although God determines all things, he causes all things only by having you freely make decisions according to your own nature, which came from Adam, whose nature mysteriously turned from holy to evil, so that God is not the author of sin, but so that you are responsible for your own decisions and actions."

⁶ Some make a distinction between natural and moral evil, but the Bible says that God causes both. See my article, "The Problem of Evil."

Instead, Paul says that God's control over *both* the "noble" and the "common" is as the potter's control over a lump of clay.⁷ And just as a lump of clay cannot question the potter, Paul's response to the objector is not, "But you made yourself evil" or "But you freely perform evil according to your own nature," but instead he says, "Shall the creature say to the Creator, 'Why did you make me like this?'"⁸ And Paul does not say, "But God is not the author of sin," but instead he says, "God has the right to make one person righteous and another person evil, to save one and damn another. Of course no one can resist his will! But who are you to talk back?"

This is the Bible's approach. It rebukes the objector and answers the objection at the same time. The answer does not deny that God is the direct cause of sin; instead, it boldly says that God has a right to make whatever he wants and do whatever he wants. Instead of stepping backward or sideways, it steps toward the objector and slaps him in the face.

This is God's answer. It is strong, direct, simple, coherent, and irrefutable. It is perfect.

⁷ Of course, this is an analogy; in reality, God's control over us is much greater than a potter's control over his clay, since the potter did not create the clay and his control over it is limited – for example, he cannot make clay into gold – but God created the very material he works with and has complete control over it.

⁸ Thus Paul affirms that the reprobates are *made* reprobates by God, only that they have no right to complain.

2. The Author of Confusion

I was reading your article, "The Author of Sin," and I kept thinking, "Yes, but what about the passage that states, 'God is not the author of sin?' Certainly there must be a context for it. I want to see the context and see what the metaphysical-practical connection looks like there."

Then I thought I would go find it. Talk about being conditioned! The closest thing seems to be where the NKJV renders 1 Corinthians 14:33 as "God is not the author of confusion."

Because of reading other people's opinions over the years and seeing the phrase bantered around, I thought it must be a passage somewhere in the Bible, and for some odd reason had never thought that I needed to find it before. The bottom line is that it just isn't there.

This matter about the author of sin is religious tradition, nothing more. Although we should not focus on affirming or denying whether God is the author of sin (since it is not the Bible's focus), but should focus on God's sovereignty, there is nothing biblically or rationally wrong with saying that God is the author of sin.

The expression has been so loaded that it automatically sounds wrong or even blasphemous to people, but we can affirm it in a reverent manner. We can affirm that God indeed rules over all, not in some remote or secondary way, but in some powerful and direct way, doing whatever he pleases.

There is a simple explanation for 1 Corinthians 14:33.

First, we know from many biblical passages that God indeed causes confusion at times, such as when he fought against Israel's enemies in battle. This means that "the author of confusion" cannot be blindly applied, but we must observe the context.

The context is verse 40, which says, "Let all things be done decently and in order." This is the point of the passage and the context for verse 33. Notice that, whether it is order or confusion, Paul is giving instructions to the Corinthians, and not to God. Like James, Paul is talking about how Christians should behave, rather than the metaphysics behind their behavior. The statement refers to God's approval or disapproval of the situation, and not the metaphysical cause.

Moreover, the word "author" is not in the text in the first place. There is no hint of the word or concept of "author" in there, but it was inserted by the translators. So the NIV translates, "For God is not a God of disorder but of peace." The ESV and NASB are similar to this. A more literal translation might be, "For God is not of disorder but of peace," which is true regarding the immediate context of church order, and even when God decrees evil (including confusion), he does so according to a rational plan.

3. Why God Created Evil

One of my friends in seminary read your article and asked, "Then why did God create sin?"

Is this a bad question? Should it be "cause" and not "create"?

What are your thoughts?

To say "create" or "cause" would mean about the same thing in our context, and both words are applicable, so both are fine.

We are not using the word "create" in the same sense as God's original creation out of nothing, but we are referring to God's control over things that he has already created. Although God must actively cause evil thoughts and inclinations in the creature, and then he must actively cause the corresponding evil actions, he does not create new material or substance when he does this, since he is controlling what he has already created.

It is true that a person sins according to his evil nature, but as Luther writes, it is God who "creates" this evil nature in each newly conceived person after the pattern of fallen Adam, whose fall God also caused. And then, God must actively cause this evil nature to function and the person to act according to it. Luther writes that God never allows this evil nature to be idle in Satan and in ungodly people, but he continuously causes it to function by his power.⁹

Luther perceived the biblical and metaphysical absurdities of affirming anything short of this; in contrast, the weak view (common to Reformed Christians) is an unbiblical, unnecessary, irrational, and sophistical evasion. If our position is hyper-Calvinism (it is not), then it means that hyper-Calvinism is the correct and biblical view. Fatalism is also the wrong label for it.

As for God's purpose for sin and evil, first, as we acknowledge the biblical teaching that God is the sovereign and righteous "author of sin," even if we cannot say why he causes sin and evil, it would not undermine what I have said. Even if we do not know the reason, our view does not contradict Scripture or itself. It would only be a matter of incomplete information.

Nevertheless, we indeed have the answer, and it is in the very passage that we examined from Romans 9:

One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall

⁹ See Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, and Vincent Cheung, *Commentary on Ephesians*.

what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?

What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath – prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory – even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? (v. 19–24)

According to Paul, one reason God created the reprobates is to provide a context in which he can reveal his wrath – something that the elect will otherwise never witness or experience. The reprobates are for the education and edification of the chosen ones. They maintain a world of struggles and temptations for the elect, and in the end the elect will witness the outpouring of divine wrath against them.

One important benefit that the love of God makes available to Christians is spiritual illumination:

Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him. (John 14:21)

I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. (John 15:15)

Knowledge about spiritual things is one of the least prized gifts from God, but to be a friend of God means to have such knowledge. Many show that they do not truly love God by the scorn with which they regard doctrinal studies, although they would like to think that they love him. We should make it our priority to obtain understanding and knowledge about God:

This is what the LORD says: "Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight," declares the LORD. (Jeremiah 9:23-24)

Knowledge about God is the most valuable treasure, and everything else is "dung" in comparison (Philippians 3:8, KJV). In offering his chosen ones reliable information about himself, God is giving them one of the greatest gifts that he can give anyone.

God created the reprobates – "the objects of his wrath" or those who are "prepared for destruction" – so that he may reveal this aspect of his nature to "the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory" (Romans 9:22-23).

Since Christians have been "saved from God's wrath" (Romans 5:9) through Christ, this is one divine attribute that they will never experience, and therefore it must be demonstrated to them in other people. God desires to offer his chosen ones knowledge about himself, and this shows us to what lengths he will go to make himself known to his people.

People might dislike this explanation, but it is what the Bible teaches. All that God does is intrinsically good and righteous, so it is also good and righteous for him to create the reprobates for the above purpose. Some would be horrified by this, because they are more concerned about man's dignity and comfort than God's purpose and glory, but those who have the mind of Christ would erupt in gratitude and reverence, and affirm that God is righteous, and that he does all things well.

4. Compatibilist Freedom

– A –

Regarding compatibilist freedom...My understanding of this is that we willingly choose from a God-directed will – whether for good or evil, depending on whether he has hardened or enlightened us. Is there anything in this that you would consider incorrect/unbiblical?

I agree with what you wrote, but contrary to many Calvinists, I disagree that this should be called "freedom" in any relevant sense.

When speaking of freedom in our context, I always speak of freedom *in relation to God* – and that is why the issue becomes clear. I can consistently use the same definition whether I am dealing with the nature of God, the decree of God, the nature of man, the nature of salvation, or determinism from a philosophical perspective.

Many Calvinists do not speak this way; rather, they say that we always choose what we most desire,¹⁰ but when they add that this is "freedom" in a relevant sense, and that we are responsible based on this "freedom," then I disagree. Instead, I deny any sense of human freedom and deny any relationship between freedom and responsibility.

Moral responsibility (or accountability) has to do with whether God has decided to judge us; it has no direct relationship with whether we are free. In fact, if we were free from God but not judged by God, then we would still not be morally responsible (or accountable). In other words, moral responsibility does not presuppose human freedom, but it presupposes divine sovereignty. We are responsible not because we are free, but we are responsible precisely because we are not free.

Also, Calvinists often affirm that Adam was free before the Fall. But again, I always speak of freedom relative to God, and from this perspective, I would say that Adam had no freedom even before the Fall. To be "free" from sin is irrelevant. The issue is whether Adam was free *from God* to choose to remain free from sin – he was not. In addition, I would not say that God *permitted* Adam to fall, but that God *caused* it. Many Calvinists would also disagree with me on this.

Compatibilists would most likely refuse to say that we are free from God, but they would insist that since we always act according to the strongest desire of the moment, that this is a real sense of freedom, and that this "freedom" is the precondition for moral responsibility.

Suppose that I have committed a murder. I was indeed free from other creatures when I made my decision, and I acted according to my own desire. But this desire was caused and

¹⁰ Although they might also acknowledge that it is God who determines this desire, unlike me, they might deny that God always actively and directly causes our desires, whether good or evil.

controlled by God, and the fact that I would always act on my strongest desire (which is human nature) was also caused by God. This amounts to saying that we have no freedom *from God* to abstain from murder, but that we only have an internal freedom from other creatures to abstain from murder.

If we were to soften this and say that our desires are somehow not determined but merely permitted by God, then, even overlooking the fact that this is unbiblical, we must still explain how it is possible for God to permit something without causing it, and still immutably decree it to happen in a sense that is not merely an expression of prescience. If we cannot, then we are Arminians.

Also, if God merely permits us to do something, then I would also demand a metaphysical explanation on how it is possible for a creature to direct and control its own mind. Is it possible for a created thing to function at all under God's bare permission (if there is such a thing) without his constant causative determination? How?

Calvin wrote, "Indeed, not even an abundance of bread would benefit us in the slightest unless it were divinely turned into nourishment." This sounds like my occasionalism. There is no inherent "nature" or power in bread that always works with the body to provide nourishment, but it must be "divinely turned into nourishment" each time it is consumed. If Calvin was a Calvinist, or if Calvin was himself, then this is the true Calvinism.

My position is a consistent application of divine sovereignty over everything. It is a denial of any form of dualism or deism. I affirm that God controls everything about everything that is anything, including every aspect of every detail of every human decision and action, in such a way that man has no freedom in any meaningful or relevant sense.

Libertarian freedom is indeed freedom, but it is unbiblical and impossible – there is no such freedom. On the other hand, compatibilist freedom is not "freedom" at all, but it is only a *description* of what happens when God controls every aspect of our decisions and actions, usually according to a "nature" that he has also created in us. Both the words "compatibilist" and "freedom" are misleading.

– B –

I would consider myself a "Calvinistic" Baptist. According to my understanding, sin entered this world through the disobedience of Adam and not as a result of the determining purpose of God.

Actually, all Calvinists would affirm that sin came as a result of God's decree, so that it was determined at least in this sense. The difference is that many of them say that this is a "passive" or "permissive" decree, whereas my position is that there is no such thing as a "passive" or a "permissive" decree with God, that it is unbiblical and impossible for a divine decree to be "passive" or "permissive."

It is correct to say that sin came through the disobedience of Adam, but this is not the debated issue. The issue is what caused this disobedience. To say that before the Fall Adam

had "free will" is irrelevant unless by this "free will" is meant freedom *from God*. If this is what is meant, then this is Paganism, not Calvinism. If only freedom from sin is meant, then again this is irrelevant, since the relevant question in discussing divine determinism is whether Adam was free *from God* to abstain from sin, not whether he was free *from sin* to abstain from sin.

5. Augustine and Compatibilism

Although the quotation below comes from an introductory guide to Augustine, our main focus is compatibilism and not Augustine.

(1) Augustine's later reliance on the concepts of grace and original sin turn him into a determinist of the theological variety. Theological determinists hold that everything we do is caused by antecedent conditions, ultimately traceable to God. Although the later Augustine is clearly a theological determinist, it is more accurate to attribute to him the "soft" version of determinism known as compatibilism. Compatibilism is the view that, although all human actions are caused by antecedent conditions, it is still appropriate to call some of them "free."

(2) Compatibilists want to distinguish actions that are internally caused from actions that are externally caused. Consider, once again, the case of our patient suddenly kicking her leg. Suppose that what caused her to do this was that her physician tapped her reflex. This would mean that the action was externally caused, and hence should not be considered free. Suppose, on the other hand, that what caused her to kick her leg was a desire for attention. According to the compatibilist, this would still be an antecedent condition that made it impossible for her to refrain from kicking her leg. So, she was not free in the libertarian sense. Nevertheless, the compatibilist would call the action "free" in so far as it was internally caused. Someone else did not cause the patient to kick her leg; she did it of her own accord.

(3) Compatibilists make this distinction because they want to hold human beings morally responsible only for their "free" (i.e. internally caused) actions. If something outside of the patient caused her to kick her leg, then she cannot take the blame for it; if something inside her caused this, then she must take responsibility for it, even though she could not do otherwise.

(4) Augustine is most charitably interpreted as a compatibilist. He, like most compatibilists, retains the language of free will because he knows that it is impossible to explain the human condition without it. Nevertheless, he commandeers this language to his own deterministic purposes. He wants to maintain that human beings cannot take credit for being good. The reason is that all good actions are caused by God's grace, an external cause. At the same time, he wants to maintain that human beings must take credit for being bad. The reason is that all bad actions

are caused by our own wills. Since the will is an internal cause, we are responsible, even though we cannot do otherwise.

(5) In his latest works, Augustine devotes himself to disparaging the alleged human dignity of free will and criticizing anyone who takes pride in it. He writes that human beings are "enslaved to sin," and that the best thing that can happen to us is to receive grace and thereby become "enslaved to God" instead.

(6) Augustine's theodicy therefore makes a dubious contribution to the history of philosophy. On the one hand, it provides us with a personal yet intellectual confrontation with the problem of evil. On the other hand, it introduces the concept of free will, only to generate another set of concepts, grace and original sin, which cancel out any meaningful application of the concept of free will. In this way, Augustine reflects and reinforces the profound ambivalence toward human freedom that is endemic to Western thought.¹¹

Some of the above statements are questionable or at least imprecise, and what Augustine "knows" is sometimes just his opinion.

For example, I disagree with the statement, "He, like most compatibilists, retains the language of free will because he knows that it is impossible to explain the human condition without it." Augustine might have thought that he needed to assign some kind of freedom to man, but that does not mean he was correct. In fact, I affirm the opposite position, that to retain ("the language of") human free will in any meaningful sense would make it impossible to explain the human condition, and not only that, but it would also make the doctrine of man inconsistent with the doctrine of God.

Nevertheless, the above explanation of compatibilism is still a good demonstration of how the tension (self-contradiction) in compatibilism is obvious to those who are not biased in favor of it.

I will offer some comments on each paragraph. Each numbered portion below corresponds to a paragraph with the same number in the above section:

(1)

Theological determinists hold that everything we do is caused by antecedent conditions, ultimately traceable to God.

This is true of most theological determinists, but it is also finally incoherent. I would change this to say that all conditions are "*immediately* traceable to God."

¹¹ Sharon M. Kaye and Paul Thomson, *On Augustine* (Wadsworth, 2001), p. 25–26.

So-called "second causes" are considered the means by which God executes his immutable decrees; however, these second causes are not themselves self-existent, self-determined, self-caused, or self-powered. Rather, all so-called "secondary causes" are themselves immediately caused and controlled by God, and the objects on which these secondary causes supposedly act upon react in ways that are also immediately caused and controlled by God. In other words, the term is misleading, and in fact nonsense.

This is the only coherent and defensible position. When pressed, theological determinists who differ from this must rather quickly retreat into mystery and paradox.

Compatibilism is the view that, although all human actions are caused by antecedent conditions, it is still appropriate to call some of them "free."

Why is the word "free" in quotations here and in other places? It is probably because the writers realize that it is a stretch to call compatibilist freedom "free."

Compatibilist freedom is "free" only in a private and arbitrary sense. The word "free" is inserted and used by force – it is not a natural description of compatibilism, especially when discussed in the context of divine determinism.

(2)

Freedom is relative – you are free *from something*. The compatibilist wants to affirm that we are not free from God, but at the same time he wants to make freedom applicable to our action in some sense, so he sets the standard by which freedom is measured down from God to man. Instead of measuring freedom by whether our thoughts and actions are free *from God*, we are "free" as long as we are free relative to other created things, and then we build moral responsibility on that. They just changed the reference point.

This is narrow and arbitrary. I can just as well change the standard or the reference point to whether we are free from a particular particle of dust on Neptune. If that particle of Neptune dust does not determine my thoughts and actions – if I am "free" from it – then in this sense I have "free will," and therefore I am morally responsible. However, we are considering our responsibility to God, not to other people or to random objects.

The compatibilist may answer, "The point is that the cause for an action is within me, so that I am not forced, and therefore I am free and responsible." This use of "forced" and "free" is misleading, since if God is the cause of the cause of this action, if he completely determines every detail of our very thoughts, desires, motives, and willingness...or to use the expressions in our quotation, if God is the external cause of the internal cause of our actions, so that the internal cause itself is not free even in the compatibilist sense, then the action is more than forced. It is so determined, caused, and controlled that it cannot even be described as forced, since to be "forced" leaves room for an internal conscious reluctance to perform the action that one is externally caused against his will to perform. But God has such a comprehensive control over all of our thoughts and actions that "forced" would be too weak to describe it.

So of course our actions are not "forced," because the word suggests that the one doing the forcing lacks complete control over the one being forced, so that there remains some resistance in the one being forced against the one doing the forcing, only that the one doing the forcing exerts greater power. Since "forced" implies such a scenario or relationship, it is too weak to describe God's control over us; therefore, our actions are not "forced" even though we are not free. In fact, God's control over us is so exhaustive that the compatibilist seems oblivious to it, so he thinks that he is free because he does not feel forced, when the truth is that he is much less free than if he were forced.

The compatibilist says that we are not free if our actions are externally caused, but that we are free if our actions are internally caused. However, the truth is that all our internal "causes" are themselves externally caused. All our thoughts and actions are in fact externally caused by God, so that our so-called internal causes are merely externally caused effects that lead to other effects, such as our actions.

Therefore, in this sense, none of our thoughts and actions are free even from the compatibilist perspective, that is, unless they change the reference point to start after God has already externally caused our internal causes. This is arbitrary – it is cheating – if we are going to permit this, then there is no point in arguing, since it would be clear that the compatibilist will keep changing the reference point until he can use the word "free" in some sense.

It is misleading to change the reference point so that we can affirm some sense of freedom; instead, we should consistently define freedom relative to the broadest metaphysical principle, which is God, since he is the only relevant reference point when we are discussing divine determinism. If we are not free from God in any sense, then we have no "free will" or "freedom" in any sense, that is, in the context of discussing divine determinism.

(3)

"Free" is illegitimately defined as "internally caused," even if everything about everything that is internal is in fact externally caused and controlled by God. We have addressed this, so we will move on.

Again, a main concern is the foundation for moral responsibility; meanwhile, no one seems to notice that the premise "responsibility presupposes freedom" has never been established. If we place moral responsibility back where it belongs – on God's sovereign decree to judge all mankind – then human freedom becomes irrelevant, and there would be no problem in discarding it.

(4)

Notice the twisting and turning needed to even explain compatibilism, let alone to defend it.

Compatibilists say that good is attributed to God's grace and power because sinful man has no ability within himself for any spiritual good, but evil is attributed to man because he is already sinful and to do evil would be to act according to his nature. When you ask them how that evil nature got there in the first place, and how Adam could have performed evil if he was created with a good nature, they retreat into mystery and paradox, or repeat some sort of argument based on free will, which begs the question.

On the other hand, I can say, "The Sovereign God causes all things, and he is good and righteous in all that he does. Blessed be the name of the Lord." No objection can touch this.

(5)

Again, the question is how man came to be "enslaved to sin" in the first place if he was created with a good nature. Also, I would say that whereas man has become "enslaved to sin," sin itself has always been "enslaved to God." To say that sin is in any sense free from God would be to affirm dualism.

If unsaved men are "enslaved to sin," and sin itself is "enslaved to God," and if redeemed men are "enslaved to God" in righteousness, this means that both unsaved and redeemed men are in fact "enslaved to God" – the unsaved through sin, and the redeemed through righteousness.

(6)

The writers exercise remarkable restraint toward compatibilism. They have everything set up well enough that they could blast it to smithereens, but they want to play nice. So they settle for saying that Augustine's is a "dubious contribution," and that the deterministic aspects of his philosophy "cancel out any meaningful application of the concept of free will."

This means that if a compatibilist truly affirms divine determinism, then what he says about human "freedom" or "free will" is meaningless – it is nonsense. These writers see this – most Calvinists refuse to see it.

Summary

Here is the way to avoid nonsense:

1. Affirm absolute divine determinism.
2. Deny all human freedom.
3. Base moral responsibility on God's sovereign decree to judge mankind.
4. Answer almost all related objections by doing the following:
 - a. Affirm that God is just and righteous by definition.¹²

¹² This renders all "problem of evil" and "author of sin" type of objections inapplicable.

- b. Deny the unjustified premise, "responsibility presupposes freedom."¹³

There is no twisting and turning, no philosophical gymnastics, and no need to redefine this and qualify that. God is sovereign, man is not free – and there is no problem. This is biblical, coherent, simple, and defensible.

Additional Comments

Here I will briefly address the compatibilist's claim that Scripture itself teaches compatibilism.

One of the favorite verses used to support compatibilism is Genesis 50:20, in which Joseph says to his brothers, who sold him to Egypt, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."

For this verse to support compatibilism, it must convey the idea that the brothers' action was in some sense "free"; however, the verse tells us only about their intention – it says nothing about whether or not they were free, or whether or not the intention was free.

Since the verse also tells us about God's intention, and since this intention differs from the brothers' intention, the compatibilist claims that this explains how God could immutably decree a human action, and still the decreed action (in this case, the brothers' decision and action to sell Joseph) is still "freely" performed by the human person or people involved.

However, the verse does not imply this – it is a forced inference. The verse tells us what the men intended, and it tells us what God intended, but it does not give us the piece of information that is needed to either establish or refute compatibilism, namely, the relationship between the men's intention and God's intention in this event (of selling Joseph).

As it is, the verse neither establishes nor refutes compatibilism. To understand how this verse applies to compatibilism, one must first discover the relationship between man's will and God's will from the many other verses in Scripture that address this.

As I have established in other places, many biblical passages teach that it is God's will that directly determines man's will, whether for good or for evil. Therefore, when we apply Genesis 50:20 to our topic, we could paraphrase it to say, "God intended good for your evil intention," or "God caused you to have this evil intention, and he intended good when he did it," or "God intended good (the saving of many lives) when he caused you to intend this evil (the selling of Joseph)."

The verse does not suggest that the brothers "freely" intended evil – it only says that they intended evil. Then, it says that God intended good concerning this same (evil) decision or action performed by the brothers. Adding to this the premise (established by other biblical

¹³ This renders human freedom irrelevant to the discussion.

verses) that God exercises constant and complete control over all human thoughts and actions (whether good or evil), it follows that God intended good when he caused these brothers to intend evil.

In this manner, God was righteous and the brothers were morally culpable. God was righteous since all that he does is righteous by definition, and it was a good decree that caused the evil intention in the brothers. The brothers were morally culpable since they indeed violated God's moral laws, as caused by God do to so. In all of this, there is no logical entry point for human freedom to come into the discussion, although it is often forced into the discussion.

Apply a similar analysis to the other passages used by compatibilists, and it will become obvious that none of them support compatibilism. Rather, compatibilists are so convinced of their position apart from Scripture that they easily "see" it taught in these passages even when they do not address the topic.

It is self-defeating for Calvinists to embrace a tradition that has been a burden to their doctrine rather than a support, making it incoherent and hard to defend, and making its adherents look like fools when they retreat into mystery and paradox. Granted, a bold and consistent doctrine of divine sovereignty is even more offensive than a half-baked and inconsistent Calvinism, so that even Calvinists attack it, but it is also biblical, coherent, and irrefutable.

6. "Soft" Determinism

The term "soft determinism" can be misleading. It allows its adherents to appear better than they should.

"Soft" determinism is used in contrast with "hard" determinism. Using these terms, the popular Reformed or Calvinistic position, which is compatibilism, would be called "soft" determinism, whereas my position would be called "hard" determinism. The former is "softer" regarding the control that God exercises over his creation, whereas "hard" determinism is absolute, affirming that God exercises complete control over everything.

This means that "soft" determinism is really partial determinism – God's control is not complete either in quality or quantity, or both. And if what God does not absolutely determine can still happen, then this means that there is another determining power in the universe. When we are speaking of God's relation to man, attributing partial determinism to God implies attributing partial determinism to man also. This becomes a version of dualism.

One who believes that God absolutely determines everything is a full determinist, since he believes that God fully determines everything, in terms of both quality and quantity, and in terms of both the extent and the amount of control exercised. Anything less than this is not full; therefore, it is partial.

Since "soft" determinism really means partial determinism, this also means that it is partial indeterminism (partial non-determinism). Since Calvinists usually attribute greater determining power to God than to man, this indeterminism is a "soft" indeterminism, but it is still partial indeterminism.

It becomes a matter of how one wishes to say it. So the term "soft determinism" can be misleading. To some people, it may sound kinder and less extreme, when it is in fact partial determinism, weak determinism, incomplete determinism, or even "soft" indeterminism. And, at least by implication, the heresy of dualism.

On the other hand, since "hard determinism" is in fact just "determinism," there is no need to qualify it if not for a contrast with a partial version. There is no need to say that I am a full human unless I am in a discussion involving partial humans – I am just human. So in the context of a contrast, what I affirm is full determinism, not "hard" determinism, and when it comes to God's power over his creation, I reject indeterminism.

7. Determinism, Fatalism, and Pantheism¹⁴

By some definitions, the terms "determinism" and "fatalism" are similar. Some English dictionaries fail to make a clear distinction between them. *Merriam-Webster* is too ambiguous for our purpose, and *Webster's New World Thesaurus* considers the two synonymous. Certainly, even those who affirm "soft" determinism and accuse me of teaching fatalism would not want to accept these definitions, since then they would become "soft fatalists." The definitions in theological and philosophical literature might be more precise.

By "fatalism," I refer to the teaching that all events are predetermined (1) by impersonal forces and (2) effected regardless of means, so that no matter what a person does, the same outcome will result.

By "determinism," I especially refer to theological or divine determinism. It is the teaching that the personal God of the Bible has intelligently and immutably predetermined all events, including all human thoughts, decisions, and actions, and that by predetermining both the ends and the means to those ends.

These are not my private definitions, but they are consistent with the common usage in theological and philosophical literature.

For example, Dr. Alan Cairns is a respected Presbyterian pastor and theologian, whose orthodoxy is generally unquestioned, and who is a "soft" determinist himself.¹⁵ He defines "fatalism" as follows: "The theory of inevitable necessity; the heathen oriental philosophy that all things are predetermined by *blind, irrational forces* and that therefore there is *no point in human effort* to change anything."¹⁶

I insist that it is the *personal* and *rational* God who has predetermined all things. It would be slander to accuse me of teaching that "all things are predetermined by *blind, irrational forces*," and some have indeed committed this sin against me. Then, I insist that God determines all things by immutably foreordaining and directly controlling both the ends and the means. Thus it is not that there is "no point in human effort," but that it is God who also controls human efforts as well as the effects of these efforts to produce the

¹⁴ By "determinism," we are referring to only theistic, theological, or divine determinism, and not naturalistic or scientific determinism, the latter of which being the position affirmed by many atheists. We are considering the control that God exercises over his creation, and not the relationship between human actions and antecedent natural causes (such as genetic and environmental factors). When it comes to these so-called natural causes, I affirm that it is God who directly and actively controls both these natural causes and the reactions of the objects that these natural causes supposedly act upon. In other words, my position is that all natural causes are only "causes" in a relative sense.

¹⁵ Alan Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms*, p. 186.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

predetermined results. It would be slander to accuse me of teaching that all things occur as predetermined *regardless of means*.

Therefore, it would be slander to accuse me of teaching fatalism, because the term does not apply – it means something very different from what I teach. Nevertheless, many people are more afraid of losing their religious tradition than offending God, and so they slander, persecute, and falsely accuse his people.

Just as some Arminians falsely accuse the Calvinists of teaching fatalism, some Calvinists who affirm "soft" determinism turn around and accuse me of teaching fatalism, but both the Arminians and the Calvinists misunderstand fatalism. They pretend to be scholars, but they are just ignorant religious thugs.

There is another common misunderstanding. Many people assume that there is more freedom under "determinism" and that things are more determined in "fatalism." This is false.

Things are more determined in divine determinism than in any other scheme. Under "fatalism," an event is predetermined in such a way that the same outcome results "no matter what you do," that is, regardless of means. However, under divine determinism, although it "matters" what you do, "what you do" is also predetermined. And it "matters" because there is a definite relationship between "what you do" and the outcome, although this relationship is also determined and controlled by God.

So I affirm divine determinism and not fatalism, but not for the reason that people often shun fatalism. I affirm divine determinism not because things are less controlled in this scheme – they are more controlled – but I affirm it because it is the revealed and rational truth. I cannot be charged with teaching fatalism, because the term means something different from what I teach, and also because I consider fatalism far too weak to describe God's control.

Then, there are those who charge that my determinism and occasionalism amount to pantheism.¹⁷ These people are ignorant and very stupid. Since pantheism affirms that "all is God," then it means that when God acts on any object (if God acts at all), he acts only on himself. This is far from what I believe. Rather, I affirm that God has created spiritual and material entities that are other than himself, but that he completely sustains and controls. To say that God completely *controls* X is very different from saying that God *is* X.

The accusation backfires. For my critics to charge me with pantheism *because* I affirm God's direct and total control over all things implies that *they* believe, under theism, God cannot have direct and total control over anything that is not himself; otherwise, they would not charge me with teaching pantheism when I affirm that God directly and totally controls all things. Since the created universe is not God, by implication they must affirm that God has no direct and total control over *anything* in the created universe.

¹⁷ See A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*.

By their accusation, by their application of pantheism, they imply that God is *identified* with anything over which he has direct and total control. Then, since they claim to deny pantheism, that God is identified with the universe, and since they deny my belief that God has direct and total control over all things, it follows that they believe God has no direct and total control over *anything* in the universe.

In agreement with Scripture, I say that the potter has direct and total control over the clay, but they say that this is pantheism. This implies that *they believe* the potter can have direct and total control over the clay *only if* the potter *is* the clay, and if the potter *is not* the clay, then the potter does not have direct and total control over the clay. Since it is indeed true that the potter (God) *is not* the clay (his creation), it follows that *they believe* that God has no direct and total control over his creation.

Their objection implies the assumption that God is (identified with) whatever he completely controls. Then, since Vincent Cheung teaches that God completely controls *everything*, including all human thoughts and decisions, and including all corporeal and incorporeal objects and the relationships and interactions between them (so that one moving object has no inherent power to move another object when the former strikes the latter, but that it is God who actively and directly controls them both, and that a "secondary cause" is a relative and misleading term that cannot attribute any inherent causative power to any created object, etc.), then Vincent Cheung must be teaching pantheism.

After pointing out the assumption (that God is whatever he completely controls), and after pointing out that I reject this assumption, it remains that this is *their* assumption, on the basis of which they formed their accusation against me. This is why the objection backfires. Since *their* assumption is that God is identified with whatever he completely controls, this means that if *they* believe that God completely controls *anything* at all, then God must be identified with that object, and this makes them affirm some form of pantheism. Holding constant *their* assumption, the only alternative is for them to deny that God completely controls *anything* in his creation, but then they no longer affirm even theism.

Therefore, those who accuse me of teaching pantheism must themselves affirm either some form of pantheism or finite godism. Logically speaking, they are not even Christians, but are sinners heading toward hellfire. The charitable assumption is that they are inconsistent, and very stupid. Just as they misunderstand fatalism, they also misunderstand pantheism, and they commit the sin of slander when they accuse me of teaching either doctrine.

On the other hand, I affirm that God completely controls everything about everything that is anything, and this does not imply that he is identified with those things that he controls. He sustains and controls his creation, but his creation is something other than himself.

8. "Apparent" Contradictions

Many Calvinists and Reformed writers assert that there is an "antinomy," paradox, or so-called apparent contradiction between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. They are wrong – there is no such apparent contradiction. As Luther observes in *The Bondage of the Will*, people make up contradictions where there is none. Calling it an "apparent" contradiction does not make it better if they should not be seeing any kind of contradiction in the first place. Calvinists and Reformed writers should stop this.

It is possible that two propositions can appear contradictory to a person when there is in fact no contradiction. When this happens, the problem is in the person and not the propositions. Perhaps he has made a mistake in reasoning, or perhaps he lacks some information that he needs to correctly understand the propositions. Often, it is because he is biased against the truth and refuses to acknowledge what stands plainly before him.

Whether or not there is an actual contradiction, as long as a person perceives an apparent contradiction between two propositions, he cannot affirm both propositions. This is because when there is a contradiction between two propositions, whether it is an apparent or actual contradiction, it always means that to affirm one is to deny the other at the same time. Therefore, to affirm two propositions that contradict each other is in fact to deny both propositions in reverse order.

If X and Y contradict each other, then $X = \text{not-}Y$ and $Y = \text{not-}X$. Then, to affirm both X and Y is the same as affirming not-Y and not-X, which is to deny both X and Y, only in reverse order. Of course, since $\text{not-}Y = X$ and $\text{not-}X = Y$, then this means to deny both X and Y is really to affirm both in reverse order. But again, to affirm both is to deny both in reverse order, and this continues without end. To affirm both is to deny both, and to deny both is to affirm both. Therefore, to affirm two contradictory propositions is to say nothing, or worse than nothing, because it shows that the person is stupid.

When a person thinks that he sees a contradiction between two propositions in Scripture, he should indeed assume that the contradiction is only apparent, and that the propositions appear to contradict only because of his lack of intelligence or information, and not because there is an actual contradiction. Moreover, unlike those theologians who pretend to speak for all of humanity when they claim that man's "finite mind" cannot resolve the apparent contradictions in theology, one should not assume that everyone else must perceive the apparent contradiction. Perhaps the matter is not so difficult that everyone must be puzzled by it; rather, maybe the one who perceives the apparent contradiction is more stupid than everyone else. In any case, as long as the two propositions appear contradictory to him, he cannot affirm both at the same time.

Since Scripture in fact does not contradict itself, this is just another way of saying that a person cannot truly affirm a biblical proposition until he understands what it means. He

cannot truly affirm a part of Scripture that he does not understand. If he does not understand what a proposition means, then what he affirms is not in fact that proposition, but some other proposition in his mind.

In other words, when a person reads propositions X and Y, but misunderstands at least one of the propositions so that his mind perceives X and A, and if X and A contradict each other even though X and Y do not contradict, then it would appear to the person that X and Y contradict each other even though it is really X and A that contradict each other, since the person thinks that he is thinking about X and Y, when he is really thinking about X and A.

A biblical proposition misunderstood becomes a non-biblical proposition in a person's mind, and a biblical proposition can certainly contradict a non-biblical one, or two non-biblical propositions can certainly contradict each other. This is one of the things that could happen when a person sees an "apparent" contradiction in Scripture. One or both sides of the alleged contradiction is in fact not the biblical proposition, because it has been distorted.

Or, a person might correctly understand propositions X and Y, but he also affirms a false premise Q, which appears to make X and Y contradict each other when by themselves they do not contradict.

One example is the relationship between divine sovereignty (X) and human responsibility (Y). By themselves, there is no contradiction between the two, whether actual or apparent. However, the two will appear to contradict if a person forcibly imposes upon them the premise "responsibility presupposes freedom" (Q). Now it appears that X contradicts Y. In fact, if Q is true, then this would be an actual contradiction, and not only an apparent one. But once we realize that Q is false, even the appearance of a contradiction disappears. The key is to correctly understand what Scripture says, and to stop adding foolish ideas that do not come from Scripture.

If a person understands what the Bible says, and if he does not impose his own stupid assumptions upon it, then the Bible will never appear contradictory to him. He will never see even one apparent contradiction in the Bible. This is because the Bible never contradicts itself. However, if he does not understand the Bible, then he might perceive some apparent contradictions. Since the Bible does not contradict itself, he must assume that these are only apparent contradictions, and that the Bible is in fact contradicting his false beliefs and foolish assumptions. Nevertheless, as long as he perceives these apparent contradictions, he cannot affirm what the Bible teaches. He must study to grasp the true meaning, and to purge himself of false ideas, including many religious traditions that have been invented by the theologians. Then he will see that the contradictions never really existed in the first place.

Christians often scream "Mystery!" and "Paradox!" when they encounter biblical propositions that are obviously non-contradictory unless made contradictory by some spectacular distortion or strange and stupid assumption. This is not a sign of reverence or humility, but a denial of the clarity and the unity of Scripture, and a tremendous insult to

the wisdom and integrity of God, who inspired the Scripture for us to understand, believe, and obey. This illegitimate appeal to mystery and paradox also grants ammunition to the enemies of the faith. Rather, we must affirm that the Bible is clear and consistent, and that it contains no apparent or actual contradictions.

9. The "Sincere Offer" of the Gospel

The doctrine in question has been called "the free offer," "the well-meant offer," and "the sincere offer" of the gospel. It is a false teaching that makes God into a schizophrenic fool. It is unbiblical and irrational, and it must be opposed.

We do not know beforehand who are numbered among the elect and who are numbered among the non-elect, and Scripture commands us to preach to every person. Therefore, we must not try to decide who are the elect and the non-elect, and then preach the gospel only to those whom we consider the elect. We must preach the gospel to all men.

That said, it is wrong to preach the gospel as if there is a chance for the non-elect to obtain faith and be saved, as if God is sincerely telling them that he desires their salvation and that they could be saved (Luke 10:21; John 6:65). We do not know the content of God's decree in election in terms of who are the elect and who are the non-elect, and so we must not act as if we know, but it does not follow that we should speak as if he has not made such a decree when we preach the gospel.

In our preaching, we must make it clear that God commands every person, whether elect or non-elect, to believe the gospel, thus testifying to every person's obligation to believe – those who do will be saved, and those who do not will be damned. However, we must not present this as a "sincere offer" of salvation from God even to the non-elect.

Faith is God's sovereign gift, and God has decided to withhold it from the non-elect, but instead he chooses to harden them; therefore, to offer salvation to the non-elect as if God desires them to be saved and as if it is possible for them to be saved would be to lie to them in God's name. There is no offer of salvation to the non-elect, but only a command that they can never obey, and God will punish them with hellfire.

This does not prevent us from preaching the gospel to all men, since it is not our duty or right to pick out the elect and preach only to them, or to pick out the non-elect and exclude them. The point is that we must not present the gospel as a sincere offer to all, as if God's "desire" can differ from his decree, as if God could or would decree against his "desire,"¹⁸ and as if it is possible for even the non-elect to be saved.

¹⁸ Scripture teaches that God decrees what he desires, and what he desires, he decrees and causes to happen. He determines all things according to his "good pleasure." Dabney tries to preserve the "sincere offer" by asserting that there are complex motives in God, so that although God desires the salvation of the non-elect, a stronger motive or reason in him overrides it, and this is why he has not chosen to save the non-elect. Dabney hopes that this explanation preserves both his belief that God desires to save everyone, and that God chooses only some people. However, he fails to show that there are these differing and in fact conflicting motives in God. Moreover, even if we assume for the sake of argument that there are conflicting motives in God, this fails to rescue the "sincere offer," because at the point of the divine decree of only some people for salvation and then at the point of the preaching of the gospel, the stronger motive to choose only some people for salvation has already overridden the desire to save all, so that the divine

God loves the elect and desires (and thus has decreed) their salvation; he hates the reprobates and desires (and thus has decreed) their damnation (Romans 9:13). The preaching of the gospel must be consistent with this. So we must present the gospel as a serious command to all, as if it is required of all to believe (Acts 17:30), and as if God intends to summon the elect and harden the non-elect by the same preaching of the gospel (2 Corinthians 2:15-16).

Thus we must preach the gospel to all men for at least three reasons: 1. God commands us to preach the gospel to all people, 2. We do not know and should not consider beforehand who are the elect and who are the reprobates, and 3. The purpose of preaching the gospel is not only to summon the elect to faith, but also to harden the reprobates in their unbelief.

Although the topic might not always come up, it is not wrong to announce that God desires to save only the elect and has chosen only them for salvation, and that he will grant faith only to them, so that only they can believe. And it is not wrong to announce that God desires to damn the reprobates and has chosen them for damnation, and that he will not only withhold faith from them, but that he will also harden their minds against the gospel, making it impossible for them to believe.

Just as we cannot determine beforehand who are the elect and who are the reprobates when we preach the gospel, our hearers must not try to determine for themselves whether they are among the elect or the reprobates, and then make that the basis as to whether they should call on God for salvation. When one hears the gospel, he should not say, "God saves only the elect, and I am probably among the reprobates, so it is pointless for me to seek God." In fact, if one stubbornly thinks this way even when given a clear explanation of the gospel, this is an indication that he is indeed one of the reprobates, and God has chosen to establish this person in his damnation by means of this persistent deception.

Rather than concealing God's decree from our hearers, we should explain the truths concerning sin and grace, and concerning election and reprobation. More than that, we should present to them the whole system of biblical doctrines, as clearly and fully as possible (Acts 17:23-31; Matthew 28:19-20; Luke 14:27-33). Then, we must admonish them to seek God for salvation through Jesus Christ.

Since it is impossible for people to truly seek God unless his power is already at work in their hearts, those who sincerely call out to God to save them by Jesus Christ are among the elect, and God has already started his work of conversion in them. Those who insincerely or superficially obey, and who after a while fall away, or those who refuse to come at all, are among the non-elect, whose minds God has hardened even more by the preaching of the gospel (2 Corinthians 2:15-16; 2 Thessalonians 1:8).

decree and our preaching no longer express or permit any desire in God to save all. There remains no "offer" to the non-elect. In other words, even if God's motives are self-conflicting, the decree and the preaching are not, but the decree and the preaching are what we are talking about. Therefore, there is no reason to believe that Dabney is correct about conflicting motives in God, but even if he is correct, it is irrelevant.

Therefore, in rejecting the so-called "sincere offer" of the gospel, the preaching of the gospel is not diminished or rendered narrow and selective. Instead, our doctrine is a consistent and necessary application of Scripture concerning the sovereignty of God, election and reprobation, and the preaching of the gospel. It is a biblical and coherent view that values the preaching of the gospel, and indeed the propagation of the whole system of biblical doctrines, to all men everywhere. Moreover, it acknowledges what Scripture teaches about the purpose and the effect of the preaching of the gospel, that is, to summon the elect and to harden the reprobates.¹⁹

¹⁹ See David Engelsma, *Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel* and *Common Grace Revisited* for more on this subject.

10. "Forced to Believe"

The son of Charles Hodge, and himself a seminary professor, the orthodoxy of respected theologian A. A. Hodge is generally unquestioned. So we will go to him for fair and representative examples of the ridiculous errors in what is often called Calvinism.

In the context of discussing the doctrine that God created all things out of nothing, he writes:

Although the absolute origination of any new existence out of nothing is to us confessedly inconceivable, it is not one whit more so than the relation of the infinite foreknowledge, or foreordination, or providential control of God to the free agency of men, nor than many other truths which we are all forced to believe.²⁰

In other words, he thinks that the biblical doctrine of creation is "inconceivable," but this is not a problem because "many other" biblical doctrines are also inconceivable. However, if something is "inconceivable," then you cannot even retain it in your mind. This is why he says that we are "forced" to believe these doctrines. But whether forced or not, if you cannot even have it in your mind, you cannot believe it. You cannot even think it. He expects us to swallow this.

The Bible never talks about its own doctrines this way. It never says that its teachings are rationally inconceivable. It never says that they are rationally so difficult to grasp or to accept that we must be "forced to believe" them. Since the Bible does not call its own doctrines "inconceivable" and that we are "forced to believe" them, this means that when Hodges speaks this way, he slanders the word of God and becomes a false teacher.

Rather, he is measuring biblical doctrines against some anti-biblical standard. Since what is biblical is incompatible with what is anti-biblical, if he insists on embracing both, then of course the biblical doctrines would appear "inconceivable," and of course he would feel as if he is "forced to believe" them. The problem is in Hodge himself, and not in the Bible. He thinks that he has been forced to believe. He thinks that he has been forced to be a Christian.

There are many people like Hodge. They speak this way about God, but they regard themselves as scholars, theologians, and defenders of the faith. Then Christians follow their doctrines as pagans follow their idols, and in the name of orthodoxy they attack those who disagree with their nonsense. In contrast, I say that although God's mind is infinitely greater than our minds, all that God has revealed – all biblical doctrines – are conceivable, understandable, reasonable, defensible, and undeniable.

²⁰ A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1999 edition), p. 240.

The Bible teaches that non-Christians are sinful and stupid, so that it is impossible for them to affirm that which is holy and true, and therefore unless God directly acts on their minds and changes them, they will never believe. However, biblical doctrines are easy for the elect to believe because God has enlightened their minds and made them rational, and has given them the gift of faith.

Biblical doctrines are inconceivable only to a mind biased to wickedness and falsehood. If we take the principles and assumptions from two opposing worldviews and attempt to jam them together, then of course we will end up with something inconceivable. Of course a person would feel "forced" if he holds to non-Christians beliefs, but he is told that he must believe the Christian doctrines at the same time. But this has nothing to do with the biblical doctrines. This is not the Christian faith.

Hodge's perspective is revealing, because it is autobiographical – the biblical doctrines are "inconceivable" to him. He feels "forced" to believe what God tells him, as if it is unnatural to him to believe in the Christian faith. What he says about the biblical doctrines is rubbish, but it exposes something defective within himself. Yet his errors are widespread, and common to most Calvinist and Reformed writers. There is something defective in these people.

The permission of sin, in its relation both to the righteousness and goodness of God, is an insolvable mystery, and all attempts to solve it only darken counsel with words without knowledge. It is, however, the privilege of our faith to know, though not of our philosophy to comprehend, that it is assuredly a most wise, righteous, and merciful permission; and that it shall rebound to the glory of God and to the good of his chosen.²¹

Scripture does not say that sin occurs by bare permission. Also, sin is not "an insolvable mystery," since Scripture explains it. Hodge is the one who darkens the issue.

God possessing infinite foreknowledge and power, existed alone from eternity; and in time, self-prompted, began to create in an absolute vacuum. Whatever limiting causes or conditions afterwards exist were first intentionally brought into being by himself, with perfect foreknowledge of their nature, relations, and results. If God then foreseeing that if he created a certain free agent and placed him in certain relations he would freely act in a certain way, and yet with that knowledge proceeded to create that very free agent and put him in precisely those positions, God would, in so doing, obviously predetermine the certain futuration of the act foreseen....²²

²¹ Hodge, p. 160.

²² Ibid., p. 203.

Yet God's permissive decree does truly determine the certain futurity of the act; because God knowing certainly that the man in question would in the given circumstances so act, did place that very man in precisely those circumstances that he should so act.²³

This is exactly the way Arminians, Open Theists, and many heretics explain God's sovereignty, that God exercises his "sovereignty" over men by placing them in circumstances in which he could predict how they would behave, rather than by acting on their minds to determine their thoughts and actions.

We have the fact distinctly revealed that God has decreed the free acts of men, and yet that the actors were none the less responsible, and consequently none the less free in their acts. – Acts 2:23; 3:18; 4:27, 28; Gen. 50:20, etc.²⁴

He talks like this throughout his text on theology. However, although some of these passages indeed state that God predetermined those acts, none of them suggest that those were "free acts." Hodge smuggled "free" in there by force, as if no one would notice. In fact, it is natural to understand these passages as saying that God predetermined those acts such that the men were not free, the opposite of what Hodge claims.

Moreover, Hodge assumes that responsibility presupposes freedom, but he never proves it. This is an unbiblical premise that has tainted numerous Calvinistic writings. It is a premise that I have repeatedly challenged and refuted.

The admission of sin into the creation of an infinitely wise, powerful, and holy God is a great mystery, of which no explanation can be given. But that God cannot be the author of sin is proved –

1st. From the nature of sin, which is, as to its essence, want of conformity to law, and disobedience to the Lawgiver.

2d. From the nature of God, who is as to essence holy, and in the administration of his kingdom always forbids and punishes sin.

3d. From the nature of man, who is a responsible free agent who originates his own acts. The Scriptures always attribute to divine grace the good actions, and to the evil heart the sinful actions of men.²⁵

The matter is not a mystery because Scripture explains it. Perhaps Hodge refuses to accept what it says. He remains puzzled, and so he declares that "no explanation can be given." In other words, he holds himself up as the zenith of human intelligence, so that if he cannot solve it, no one can. If he cannot understand something, then it must be humanly impossible

²³ Ibid., p. 210.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 211.

to understand. This is common among Calvinists and Reformed writers. It is often accompanied by a reference to man's "finite mind." This is obviously an attempt to project humility, but in reality it betrays a rare arrogance, since it suggests that these theologians define the limit of what man's "finite mind" can achieve. But maybe they cannot grasp what the Bible plainly teaches because they are more stupid than everyone else.

He thinks the claim that God cannot be the author of sin is "proved" by these three points, but he does not even show how they are relevant. The first point does not show that God cannot be the author of sin; rather, if God is the author of sin, the first point shows us what he has authored. The second point also fails. It does not show that God cannot be the author of sin; rather, if God is the author of sin, it tells us that it is holy for him to be the author of sin, the sovereign ruler of all things and events. To "author" sin is not the same thing as to sin. The third point begs the question, because he has previously failed to show that man is a "free agent who originates his own acts." Then, the second part of this third point, although commonly assumed, is false. Scripture indeed *blames* sinful actions on men, and says that God will judge them, but it often *attribute* these actions of men to the sovereign decree and active power of God.

Hodge is so crippled in his reasoning because he is dragging behind him all the weight of Arminianism, humanism, and his religious heritage while he tries to be a Calvinist. Many others are like this. In the best Calvinists, you will probably find at least one major blunder like those above every several pages. In the average Calvinists, you will sometimes find several on every page. And the worst Calvinists are really Arminians or worse. Yet Calvinists and Reformed Christians are so proud of their stance on divine sovereignty. They consider themselves the defenders of orthodoxy, when much of what they believe consists of human traditions, ideas that men made up.

The doctrine of unconditional decrees presents no special difficulty. It represents God as decreeing that the sin shall eventuate as the free act of the sinner, and not as by any form of co-action causing, nor by any form of temptation inducing, him to sin.²⁶

This contradicts both the Scripture and the Reformers.²⁷ The truth is that even the term "co-action" would be too weak to describe God's active determination of the sinful acts of men.

It is a frightful but undeniable truth that multitudes, even in Christian countries, are born and brought up in such circumstances as afford them no probable, even no possible, chance of obtaining a knowledge of religious truth, or a habit of moral conduct, but are even trained from infancy in superstitious error and gross depravity. Why this should be permitted neither Calvinist nor Arminian can explain; nay, why the Almighty does not cause to die in the cradle every infant whose future wickedness and misery, if suffered to grow up, he foresees, is what no

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ See Vincent Cheung, *Commentary on Ephesians* and Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*.

system of religion, natural or revealed, will enable us satisfactorily to account for.²⁸

Although Hodge did not write this paragraph, he is quoting Archbishop Whately with approval. Whately claims that no "system of religion" can explain the issue, but then he must have never heard of Christianity, and what it teaches in Romans 1, 2, 9, and other places. Again, since Hodge agrees with this, perhaps he is also ignorant of a religion called Christianity that clearly addresses the topic.

The decree of election only makes the repentance and faith of the elect certain. But the antecedent certainty of a free act is not inconsistent with its freedom, otherwise the certain foreknowledge of a free act would be impossible. The decree of election does not cause the faith, and it does not interfere with the agent in acting, and certainly it does not supersede the absolute necessity of it.²⁹

I laughed aloud when I read this, and I smiled even as I looked at it again just now. This person is so stupid. This so badly begs the question.

He says that divine foreknowledge must be compatible with human freedom, or else divine foreknowledge would be impossible. That is, he first insists that there is human freedom – he must have this no matter what – and if this contradicts divine foreknowledge, then divine foreknowledge would be impossible. Then, since he is generous enough to also let God have his foreknowledge, he thinks that human freedom must be compatible with divine foreknowledge.

Hodge maintains that the two are compatible, but he does not demonstrate that they are compatible. Rather, he asserts that they are compatible by force because he is unwilling to abandon either divine foreknowledge or human freedom, especially human freedom. However, one could say that since divine foreknowledge is true, then human freedom is impossible. Scripture teaches human responsibility, not human freedom, and responsibility does not presuppose freedom. As for the statement, "The decree of election does not cause the faith," this contradicts the Scripture, but also the Calvinism that he claims to represent.

There is just as great an apparent difficulty in reconciling God's certain foreknowledge of the final impenitence of the great majority of those to whom he offers and upon whom he presses, by every argument, his love with the fact of that offer; especially when we reflect that he foresees that his offers will certainly increase their guilt and misery.³⁰

This is just a convoluted admission that the unbiblical doctrine of the "sincere offer" is nonsense. Falling in line with his religious heritage, Hodge thinks that Scripture teaches it, and so he is compelled to swallow it. This is not an "apparent difficulty" – the thing that

²⁸ Hodge, p. 227.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 228.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 229.

Hodge thinks God is afflicted with is called *schizophrenia*. The problem is compounded when he realizes that God foresees that the reprobates' rejection of the gospel will increase their sin and punishment.

The biblical doctrine is straightforward. There is no "sincere offer." God commands men everywhere to repent – the ones chosen for salvation will obey and be saved, but the ones chosen for damnation will disobey and be damned. By God's active decree and control, the reprobates are already sinful and prepared for hell, and their rejection of the gospel increases that guilt, and this is what God wants to happen (2 Corinthians 2:14-16). There is no "apparent difficulty."

[Continuous creation] is inconsistent with our original and necessary intuitions of truth of all kinds, physical, intellectual, and moral. Our original intuitions assure us of the real and permanent existence of spiritual and material substances exercising powers, and of our own spirits as real, self-determining causes of action, and consequently as responsible moral agents. But if this doctrine is true these primary, constitutional intuitions of our nature deceive us, and if these deceive us, the whole universe is an illusion, our own natures a delusion, and absolute skepticism inevitable.³¹

Hodge attempts to refute continuous creation. He says that continuous creation contradicts our intuition, so that if continuous creation is right, then our intuition is wrong, and if our intuition is right, then continuous creation is wrong.

So what? First, he fails to show that our intuition is universal. My own intuition contradicts what he is saying here. It could even agree with continuous creation. In any case, he cannot speak for me. Second, he fails to show that our intuition is infallible – perhaps we have no idea whether it is right or wrong. Third, he fails to show that our intuition is necessary. He claims that if we deny our intuition, then "absolute skepticism" is inevitable – absolute! – but he fails to show this.

He claims that if our intuition is false, then "the whole universe is an illusion" – not that *our sense* of the universe is an illusion, but that *the whole universe* is an illusion. It is as if the ontological status of the whole universe – not just our sense of it – depends on our intuition. This can be true only if Hodge himself is God, so that the status of reality stands or falls along with his sense of reality. Even if he means only our sense of it, it still does not follow that if our intuition is wrong, then the whole universe would be an illusion. Perhaps only a sense of certainty is lost. In any case, he fails to show that we must reject absolute skepticism in the first place, or that belief in our intuition is the only way to escape skepticism. It seems he does not only want us to trust our intuition, he wants to become the voice of intuition for all of us.

Then, he attempts a positive construction. As before, he imposes his intuition on all of humanity:

³¹ Ibid., p. 261.

The properties or active powers have a real, and not merely apparent, efficiency as second causes in producing the effects proper to them; and the phenomena alike of consciousness and of the outward world are really produced by the efficient agency of second causes, as we are informed by our native and necessary intuitions.³²

He fails to show that our intuition tells us all of this – my intuition does not. And he does not establish that this intuition or what this intuition allegedly tells us is "native and necessary" even to himself. Nevertheless, he declares his doctrine of divine providence on this basis.

Even we, if we thoroughly understand a friend's character, and all the present circumstances under which he acts, are often absolutely certain how he will freely act, though absent from us.³³

Hodge is addressing the topic, "Prove that the certainty of a volition is in no degree inconsistent with the liberty of the agent in that act." He fails to prove this. Just because he inserts the word "freely" does not mean that it belongs there. I can just as easily say, "Even we, if we thoroughly understand a friend's character, and all the present circumstances under which he acts, are often absolutely certain how he will act, though absent from us; therefore, his action is *not free* but determined." Thus he again begs the question.

³² Ibid., p. 261-262.

³³ Ibid., p. 291.

11. Few are Chosen

Does the doctrine of election imply that only a chosen few will end up in heaven, and thus, the majority will go to hell? Does Matthew 7:13-14 conclusively support this notion?

Let us read what those verses say. Since Matthew 22:14 is also often mentioned in connection with this question, we will include it in our discussion.

Matthew 7:13-14 (NASB)

Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it.

Matthew 22:14 (NASB)

For many are called, but few are chosen.

The doctrine of election indeed teaches that only the chosen ones will end up in heaven, but the idea of election in itself does not tell us whether that number will be great or small, or whether it will be greater than the number of the reprobates.

When it comes to the number of those who have been chosen for salvation, Scripture promises that there will be many saved. For example, God said to Abraham, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars – if indeed you can count them....So shall your offspring be" (Genesis 15:5). Scripture teaches that God was referring to his spiritual offspring, and not his natural descendants.

Then, Revelation 7:9-10 reads:

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

So we know that many will be saved. Some people have mistakenly inferred that the number of those saved will be greater than those damned in the end, but these passages do not say this.

Many will be saved relative to zero, but the question is how many will be saved relative to the damned. The two verses from Matthew seem relevant. One says, "few are those who find it" and the other says, "few are chosen." If these two verses address our question, then

here is the answer: the number of the saved will be smaller than the number of the damned, and in fact much smaller, since Jesus makes the contrast between the "many" and the "few."

There are those who assert that these two passages cannot function as a broad answer to our question. They claim that the context suggests that they address only the first century situation. However, I am unconvinced by this because I see no definitive indication that the context restricts their application this way. It appears these people assume that the saved must be more than the damned, so that they are determined to reach this conclusion even when the evidence does not favor it.

There are other arguments that are used to show that the number of the saved will be greater than the number of the damned, but they are ineffective.

For example, it is sometimes said that the number of the saved will be much greater than the damned because God will seize the "victory" in the end. He will never "lose" to Satan in the battle between good and evil, and over human souls. Some prominent Reformed theologians have used the argument.

This is silly – it is arbitrary and self-defeating. It is arbitrary because it assumes that "victory" in this situation is defined by numbers, but they fail to support this premise. It is self-defeating because if "victory" is defined by sheer numbers, then even if one person ends up in hell, it would mean that God has failed to obtain a complete victory over Satan. But many people are already in hell.

The argument has a certain dualistic flavor. It suggests that Satan is a mighty evil force with whom even God himself must contend, that God will win some and lose some, even if he wins more than he loses in the end.

Those who end up in heaven are saved because God has predetermined their salvation, and those who end up in hell are damned because God has predetermined their damnation. So how could God "lose" when all those who will end up in hell will be there only because he has decided beforehand to send them there? God could "lose" only if what he has foreordained fails to happen, or if what he has not foreordained happens anyway.

If some of those whom God has chosen for salvation fail to be saved and end up in hell, then we could say that God loses; or, if some of those whom God has chosen for damnation somehow end up in heaven, then God also loses. It is stupid to say that God loses if more people end up in hell than in heaven even if this is what he wants, and even if this is what he has predetermined to happen. In fact, if God had decided that every person should end up in hell, then we could say that he loses even if one person manages to enter heaven.

God wins if his will is done. Whether more people will end up in heaven than in hell in itself has no relevance to whether God "wins" or "loses," but if what happens is what God has predetermined to happen, then he wins.

Postmillennialism, if shown to be biblical and relevant, might make it possible that the number of the saved will be greater than the damned. The doctrine teaches that, according to numerous biblical prophecies that apply before the return of Christ, there will be an extended period in which the gospel will increase in its success and influence, even in the hearts of men, such that it will dominate the world. It says that although the Christian faith will fluctuate in its influence throughout history, it will eventually overcome all oppositions to capture the hearts of many, and thus also penetrate all areas of society.

If postmillennialism is correct, then it is possible that more people will be saved than damned, that more will end up in heaven than in hell. This is only a possibility, because we must establish two things to make way for such a conclusion.

First, we must establish that the two passages from Matthew are indeed referring only to the first century situation. This has not been done. Second, we must establish that the period of time during which the gospel will dominate the hearts of men, and during which more people will become Christians than those who will remain non-Christians, will be very long. It must be long enough to compensate for all the previous centuries in which more people remained non-Christians (including false converts) than those who became Christians. This period will probably need to last hundreds or even thousands of years.

If the first cannot be established, then the second one becomes irrelevant. That is, if the two passages from Matthew say what they seem to say, and right now we have no reason to think otherwise, that as a general rule for all time, more people will remain unsaved than those who are saved, then this means that the period during which the gospel will dominate will not be long enough to put more people in heaven than in hell. Or, even if this period will be very long, not enough people will be born or converted to make the total number of people saved greater than the total number of people damned.

In any case, we are certain that all things will happen as God has predetermined, and therefore he "wins" even if more people will end up in hell than in heaven. If this is what happens, then this is what he wants to happen.

12. The Doctrine of Hell

This is a summary of the biblical doctrine of hell. Some of the items below are vehemently opposed by many people, including those who call themselves Calvinists and Reformed Christians. They are so proud of their stance on divine sovereignty, but their doctrine is a severely weakened and compromised version of what the Bible teaches, and I have refuted them in various places.

1. Hell is a place created for reprobate spirits, both angels and men.
2. Hell is a place whose inhabitants are sovereignly and unconditionally chosen and created by God for damnation.³⁴
3. Hell is a place in which God exacts non-redemptive but vindictive punishments upon its inhabitants.
4. Hell is a place in which God actively causes endless, conscious, and extreme torment for its inhabitants.
5. Hell is a place in which God displays his justice, righteousness, wrath, and power, and through which he glorifies himself.
6. Hell is a place that God has sovereignly created, and everything that God does is right and good by definition; therefore, it is right and good that God has created hell.³⁵
7. Hell is a place that God has sovereignly created, and through which he glorifies himself; therefore, it is sinful to disapprove of or be repulsed by its existence or purpose in any way.³⁶

³⁴ Any condition that seems to correlate with God's reprobation of an individual has been sovereignly decreed to be part of that individual by God in the first place. A person is chosen for hell not by (or on any condition determined by) his own "free" will (which does not exist), but by God's sovereign will, which also sovereignly decrees and actively supplies all the conditions that God himself considers proper and necessary, such as sin and unbelief.

³⁵ We find an analogy in the existence or creation of evil. Although evil is evil (evil is not good), since evil exists only because God has actively and sovereignly decreed it (not passively or permissively), therefore it is good that there is evil. In other words, evil is evil (evil is not good), but God's decree is good – that is, his decree that evil should exist by his active will and power. Evil is evil and not good, but God did nothing wrong in decreeing evil; he did a right and good thing in decreeing evil. Likewise, God did a right and good thing in creating hell and in sovereignly, actively, and unconditionally predetermining the damnation of the reprobates.

³⁶ It is right and proper to consider and discuss the topic with fear and trembling, knowing the severity and power of God, but it is wrong and sinful to consider and discuss the topic in a way that implies disapproval of or repulsion toward hell, as if to say that God did something wrong in creating it. To disapprove of or be

8. Hell is a place that God has sovereignly created, and through which he glorifies himself; therefore, it is right and good to offer reverent and exuberant praise and thanksgiving to God for its creation, existence, and purpose.

9. Hell is a place that God warns about in Scripture, and that Christ preached about in his ministry on earth; therefore, it is right and good for believers to preach about hell, and to preach about the only way to avoid it, which is faith in Jesus Christ, sovereignly granted by God to those whom he has chosen for salvation.

10. Hell is a place that God has predestined for the reprobates; therefore, although it is right and good to preach the gospel to all men, so as to summon the elect and harden the reprobates, it is wrong and sinful to preach as if God sincerely desires the salvation of the reprobates or as if it is possible for the reprobates to receive faith and be saved.³⁷

repulsed by hell is not a sign of compassion, but a sign of rebellion that desires human welfare and comfort even apart from faith and holiness, and apart from dependence on the grace of God.

³⁷ This refers to the so-called "sincere offer" of the gospel.

13. Evil and Privation

We talked a while back about God being the author of evil in the sense that God is the cause of all things. Yet evil is a privation and not really an essence, is it not? I ask because I heard someone on a radio program say, "Evil is not an ontological essence in and of itself. It is a deprivation, or lack of good."

It is asserted that evil is a privation, so that it is not a "thing" in itself. Then, it is implied that this is inconsistent with the idea that God is the author of evil (in the sense that he is the author of all things).

We might say that evil does not have an ontological status like good, since God himself is Good, and there is no counterpart Evil. If this is what we mean, then it is true. We reject dualism, or the view that Good and Evil are two self-existing eternal powers that oppose each other.

However, we never said that evil is an object or essence that exists in itself without necessary association with an intelligent entity. Even "good" does not exist this way. Just as God is good, Satan is evil, demons are evil, and sinners are evil. Satan, demons, and sinners exist as objects themselves. Although God sustains and controls them, just as he sustains and controls all things, they are not merely a "privation" of God. If God disappears, we would not suddenly end up with Satan, but there would be nothing.

This exposes the dangerous implication of the idea that evil is the mere privation of good. That is, if evil is the mere privation of good, and God is good, it would mean that evil is ontologically more basic than God himself. Since evil is necessarily associated with an entity, it could even suggest that Satan is more basic than God. Therefore, those who use this principle as some kind of theodicy or to distance God from evil not only ends up with a version of dualism, but also ends up with Satan as the supreme entity instead of God. It ends in blasphemy.

God is ontologically the most basic entity, and he is good. He is always good and righteous, and therefore it must be "good" that there is evil (although evil itself is evil, and not good). The Bible explains that one reason for evil is for God to reveal his wrath, so that he may glorify himself by the punishment of the reprobates, and at the same time educate the elect concerning his power and justice.

14. Arguing by Intuition

In one chapter of his book, *Thinking about God*,³⁸ Gregory E. Ganssle explains freedom and determinism, and concludes that he favors "libertarian free will." He argues as follows:

Now, why should you agree with me about the nature of human freedom? Let me give you two reasons. First, it *seems strange* to hold someone morally responsible for an action if that action is not up to him. If determinism is true, then no action is up to the one who does it. At least no action is up to the one who does it to a high enough degree to make it reasonable to hold the person responsible. Yet we do hold each other morally responsible. The best explanation is that some actions are up to us and we are responsible for them.

Second, libertarian free will makes the most sense of our deliberation. We often find ourselves deliberating between alternatives, and *we are convinced* that our deliberation has a real effect on the outcome. The decision we come to, upon deliberating, *seems to be* up to us. If freedom is not of the libertarian kind, then deliberation does not make as much sense. Thus, libertarian freedom is the better concept of freedom, and compatibilist freedom is no freedom at all.³⁹

There are numerous errors, but I will first focus on those words that are relevant to our topic, which is intuition.

If we were to debate the issue of human freedom, will Ganssle come at me with "seems strange," "we are convinced," and "seems to be"? I can just as readily say it "seems *right*," "I am *not* convinced, and "seems *not* to be"! He is convinced of the premises that seem to him as true, but I can be just as convinced of the opposite. Once you mix "seems like" as an essential part of your argument, you have left the area of rational argumentation, and you have lost the right to stop your opponent from using the same tactic. To him it always "seems like" that you are wrong.

Someone might say, "If God is absolutely sovereign, then he controls even our decisions, so that we do not have freedom or free will. However, we sense (we are convinced, we feel, we think, it seems like) that we do have freedom or free will; therefore, the doctrine of divine sovereignty must be false." I sense, it seems to me, and my intuition tells me, that he is an idiot. If he is not an idiot, then he might be right and I might be wrong; therefore he must be an idiot.

³⁸ Gregory E. Ganssle, *Thinking About God* (InterVarsity Press, 2004).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 136-137, emphasis added.

If he disagrees with my intuition, then why do I have to agree with his? If he tells me that I do not really sense that he is an idiot, then I can tell him that he does not really sense freedom. If he can claim to know what really goes on in my mind, then I can claim to know what really goes on in his mind.

Ganssle assumes that intuition is universal, that it tells us all the same things, and that he knows what it tells all of us. Is he human, or something more? In any case, he makes his argument on the basis of his impressive knowledge about even the private thoughts of all mankind. He asserts:

1. I intuitively affirm a standard of ethics such that "it *seems strange* to hold someone morally responsible for an action if that action is not up to him."
2. I am "*convinced* that our deliberation has a real effect on the outcome."
3. The decision that I come to, upon deliberating, "*seems [to me] to be*" up to me.

However, unless he can prove that he knows the private thoughts of all mankind, if he can claim to know what I intuitively affirm in my mind, then I can also claim to know what he intuitively affirms in his mind. In fact, I deny that my intuition tells me these three items. Rather, "we are convinced" that he is wrong, and that he "seems to be" confused and arbitrary. The whole thing is subjective nonsense.

Arminians sometimes base their crucial premises on intuition alone. Ganssle's pattern is common – they assume that the premises they need are true just because they seem to be true to them. They say that they are convinced that these premises are true, and often they speak for the rest of humanity by saying that we are all convinced. One of these premises is that we all *seem* to have free will. Another is that it would *seem* unjust to hold someone morally accountable who does not have free will. Their standard of truth is not God's revelation but their own intuition. What "seems" true to them becomes unquestionable, and the basis of which all other considerations must turn. In other words, they regard themselves as the ultimate authority – they regard themselves as God.

However, all the "seems like" could be wrong. Perhaps people think they have free will not because they *know* something, but because they *do not know* something.⁴⁰ Perhaps they intuitively believe certain things because they are ignorant. Luther says that we think we have free will because we have been deceived by Satan.⁴¹ In any case, the debate cannot be settled by intuition.

Many atheists also argue this way. For example, since they reject revelation, they cannot appeal to it as a foundation for ethics. Then, when they turn to their sensation, those who are less stupid realize that they cannot derive anything from it. So some of them turn to intuition, and claim that by it they know certain ethical principles. However, other than the

⁴⁰ See Gordon Clark, *Predestination*.

⁴¹ See Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*.

problems already mentioned (that intuition is non-universal, subjective, fallible, etc.), there is no reason to say that we must obey intuition.

Calvinists and Reformed writers often appeal to intuition to construct their doctrines and their arguments. They do this when they attempt to assert some of the same ideas and premises that the non-Christians and heretics affirm, such as unbiblical concepts of freedom and justice. Since these premises cannot be derived from biblical revelation, and since we can derive nothing from sensation, they take refuge in intuition. Thus they banish themselves to subjectivism and irrelevance.

One example is William G. T. Shedd. Although he is to be commended as less empirically inclined than other theologians, he fails to depend solely on God's revelation. Appeals to intuition pervade his *Dogmatic Theology*, and he does this to establish premises that only Arminians should affirm, and that only Arminians need, such as a version of free will and a false basis for moral accountability.

Ganssle mentions several points that are not directly connected with intuition, but that are also problematic. We turn our attention to the following statements, already cited at the beginning:

If determinism is true, then no action is up to the one who does it. At least no action is up to the one who does it to a high enough degree to make it reasonable to hold the person responsible. Yet we do hold each other morally responsible. The best explanation is that some actions are up to us and we are responsible for them.⁴²

To consider his points in some detail, we will separately examine each of these statements.

"If determinism is true, then no action is up to the one who does it."

This is so ambiguous that it is hard to know what to do with it. The crucial expression "up to" is undefined.⁴³ Depending on what he means, it can refer to anything from a volitional freedom relative to other creatures or a volitional freedom relative to God himself, which is absolute freedom.

The language and context demand the latter interpretation, because the claim that one's action is "up to" himself is contrasted with "determinism." The context of the book suggests that the "determinism" here is inclusive of, if not restricted to, divine determinism, or the idea that it is God who determines all things, including all human decisions. So he must mean that if one's action is "up to" himself, then it is not determined by God.

However, if any action is not determined by God, then Ganssle is no longer talking about the God of the Bible. Refer to some of my other works for an explanation on divine

⁴² Ganssle, p. 137.

⁴³ He tries to illustrate (not define) it on page 135, but fails to clarify it. On the same page, he admits, "Now, *up-to-me-ness* is not a very precise concept."

sovereignty.⁴⁴ In any case, the expression "up to" remains ambiguous, and the argument cannot succeed if even he does not seem to know what he means.

"At least no action is up to the one who does it to a high enough degree to make it reasonable to hold the person responsible."

Now things really get strange.

He says that the "up to"-ness must be high enough before it is "reasonable" to hold someone "responsible." WHY? Even if we could understand his statement, we have no reason to believe it.

But it is not easy to understand the statement. We do not even know what he means by "up to," and now he claims that there are degrees of "up to"-ness. According to him, an action can be "up to" a person to a greater or lesser degree, but he does not explain how he knows this.

He indicates that the "up to"-ness must reach a certain degree before it is "high enough" to make it *reasonable* to hold the person *responsible*." Even if we swallow the suggestion that there are degrees of "up to"-ness, how high is "high enough," and how does he know? How is the degree of "up to"-ness measured?

If the "up to"-ness must be high enough to be "reasonable," what does he mean by "reasonable"? Does he mean something that is validly deducible from true premises, or does he mean something like "morally acceptable"? If he means something like the latter, then what would he mean by "acceptable"? "Acceptable" to whom? Who sets the standard? How does he know?

By "reasonable," he is probably appealing again to his intuition, something that he cannot project or support outside of his own mind, and something that he assumes that we all share, but that we in fact do not – my intuition does not agree with him. So again, his intuition takes the place of God and sets the standard of justice for all mankind. In fact, he sets the standard for God himself.

Also, what does he mean by "responsible"? I will not try to guess, and I do not think he knows, either.

Since he contrasts the "up to"-ness of one's action against "determinism" (so if something is "up to" God, then it is not "up to" us), and since the "up to"-ness can be of a greater or lesser degree, it follows that God's "up to"-ness is also in degrees (so if something is "up to" us, then it is not "up to" God). And since Ganssle contends that many things are "up to" us, it follows that many things are not "up to" God.

Therefore, God's "up to"-ness is similar to ours, even if it is greater in degree or more frequent in instances. He might be more powerful than his creatures, so that more things

⁴⁴ See *Systematic Theology, Ultimate Questions, and Commentary on Ephesians*.

are "up to" him than "up to" us, but it remains that when it comes to "up to"-ness, he differs from us only in degree and not in kind. Thus Ganssle's deity is only a super-man or like one of the pagan gods. Again, we have lost the God of the Bible.

The Christian faith teaches something different. We are "morally responsible" in the sense that we are morally accountable to God. He will hold us accountable. He will judge us. Our beliefs and actions will have consequences because God will cause these consequences.

It is "reasonable" for God to hold us responsible in the sense that it is both logically valid and morally acceptable for him to do so. It is logically valid because this is a conclusion deducible from his own will and decree, and it is morally acceptable because he is the sole and ultimate moral standard, and he accepts his own decision to hold his creatures responsible. God is Reason, and his thinking sets the standard of what is "reasonable," not our intuition.

The whole matter is explained without mention of human freedom. It has no place to enter the discussion. If it appears, it has to be arbitrarily introduced by force. Once it is introduced, it is impossible to show its relevance unless the false premise "responsibility presupposes freedom" is also introduced by force and without argument.

"Yet we do hold each other morally responsible."

To understand this statement, and to see what is so wrong about it, we need read it in the context of the paragraph:

If determinism is true, then no action is up to the one who does it. At least no action is up to the one who does it to a high enough degree to make it reasonable to hold the person responsible. Yet we do hold each other morally responsible. The best explanation is that some actions are up to us and we are responsible for them.

To paraphrase, "If determinism is true, then we are not morally responsible. But we do hold each other morally responsible. Therefore, determinism is false." Suppose we agree that "we do hold each other morally responsible," Ganssle does not establish that this is the right thing to do. Just because we do something does not mean that it is right. It is just as easy to say, "Since determinism is true, we should not hold each other responsible," or "Since determinism is true and we hold each other responsible, determinism is consistent with responsibility."

The argument is supposed to show that determinism is false, and not merely to make sense of holding each other responsible. It is not only to explain something that we do, but that might be either right or wrong. Rather, the argument intends to refute determinism, and to do that, it depends on the premise "we do hold each other morally responsible," and on the assumption that this is the right thing to do so that this premise should be held constant.

As it stands, all this argument does is to explain why Ganssle wishes that determinism is false. He wants determinism to be false because he wants to explain why we hold each other responsible. According to him, in order to justify what we do (without showing that what we do is right or that freedom is the necessary basis for what we do), we must reject determinism (without showing that determinism is false or that it contradicts what we do). Thus what he intends as a rational defense of "libertarian free will" turns out to be incomprehensible chaos.

The Christian faith teaches something different. God has revealed his moral laws to us, and he has declared that he will hold us accountable according to these laws. He has also established human relationships and institutions by which we hold each other accountable in a relative and temporal way, to maintain a level of peace, order, and justice in human society, until he renders absolute and perfect accountability when he judges humanity. Rather than enthroning our intuition or common practice as the ultimate standard by which all other ideas are judged, the Christian faith acknowledges God as the foundation for moral responsibility.

"The best explanation is that some actions are up to us and we are responsible for them."

Again, the argument amounts to saying, "If determinism is true, then we are not morally responsible. But we do hold each other morally responsible. Therefore, *determinism is false.*" The conclusion is not a necessary inference from the premises. We can use the same premises and come to a different conclusion: "If determinism is true, then we are not morally responsible. But we do hold each other morally responsible. Therefore, *we are wrong in holding each other morally responsible.*" Both are fallacious, since the conclusions are not derived from the premises by necessary inference. Moreover, while Ganssle assumes the first premise, he offers no justification for it, and we have shown that it is false.

Ganssle's first paragraph is a complete failure, but he continues:

Second, libertarian free will makes the most sense of our deliberation. We often find ourselves deliberating between alternatives, and *we are convinced* that our deliberation has a real effect on the outcome. The decision we come to, upon deliberating, *seems to be* up to us. If freedom is not of the libertarian kind, then deliberation does not make as much sense. Thus, libertarian freedom is the better concept of freedom, and compatibilist freedom is no freedom at all.⁴⁵

Again, he first assumes that determinism is inconsistent with something that we do without showing that the two are in fact inconsistent, and then he tries to make sense of what we do without justifying what we do in the first place. So the criticisms against the first paragraph also apply to this second one.

⁴⁵ Ganssle, p. 137.

He says, "*We are convinced* that our deliberation has a real effect on the outcome." Who is he to speak for all of us? In fact, I am not convinced of this statement at all. And even if we are all convinced of this statement, this would not make it true. The premise is assumed by force, and founded on an intuition that is claimed to be common, also by force and without proof. Then, it is unclear what he means by a "real effect." What does it mean for an effect to be "real" as opposed to not real? The whole statement is unintelligible.

Then, he says, "The decision we come to, upon deliberating, *seems to be* up to us." He rests the premise on intuition alone. It is an intuition that he does not prove to be correct or to be common to everyone.

His conclusion is that, "If freedom is not of the libertarian kind, then deliberation does not make as much sense." Well, then, so much the worse for deliberation! He intends to establish libertarian free will, and to do this he claims that only libertarian free will can make sense of deliberation. The argument fails because, first, he fails to establish that only libertarian free will can make sense of deliberation; second, he fails to establish that we should make sense of deliberation; and third, he fails to establish that deliberation makes sense in the first place.

He claims that "libertarian freedom is the better concept of freedom," but at this point it is irrelevant, because he fails to establish libertarian freedom, or for that matter, any kind of freedom.

Nevertheless, this is not a complete failure, because he realizes that "compatibilist freedom is no freedom at all." This insight is clear to many people, but not to the compatibilists. As he explains earlier in the chapter, by "compatibilist freedom" he means "determined but free."⁴⁶ He states that this is a popular concept of freedom, but one that he rejects. Here he adds that it is "no freedom at all."

Since the topic is determinism relative to God, then any freedom is only relevant if it is a freedom from God. If an action is in fact determined by God, then the person who performs the action is in no sense free from God. Thus divine determinism and human freedom are mutually exclusive. Those who assert that the two are compatible invariably define determinism in a way that God does not truly determine *everything* and define freedom as something that is not in fact a freedom *from God*. Ganssle is correct – compatibilist freedom is not freedom at all. It is a trick that people invented because they wished to have it both ways, but it is impossible to affirm both divine determinism and human freedom.

Although Calvinists and Reformed Christians are proud of their stance on divine sovereignty to the point of despising other human religious traditions, their doctrine almost always falls far short of absolute divine determinism – they do not really believe that God is completely sovereign. They also falsely assume that man must have some kind of freedom in order to be held accountable. The difference is that they espouse a kind of freedom that is not freedom at all, but it is a trick.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 131.

Freedom is almost always falsely defined, even undefined. We must at least answer the question, "Free from what?" Since we are referring to divine determinism, the "determiner" is God. So the only relevant thing to be free from is God, and whether we are free from any other thing is irrelevant. Thus the question becomes, "Is man free from God in *any* sense?" Once you declare that man is free from God in some sense, you have lost the God of the Bible.

The Christian faith teaches something different. Absolute divine determinism is true; therefore, man has no freedom relative to God – he is not free from God in any sense. However, he is still morally responsible and accountable because God holds him responsible and accountable. There is no logical reason to introduce the issue of freedom. The premise, "responsibility presupposes freedom," is arbitrary, unbiblical, and impossible to prove. Rather, Scripture teaches that responsibility presupposes divine judgment, and divine judgment presupposes God's decision to make this judgment. Therefore, human responsibility presupposes divine sovereignty, not human freedom. We are morally responsible because God is sovereign and we are not free.

The question then becomes one of justice, for to many people it seems unjust to hold someone accountable who is not free. However, this is just the same question rephrased. The issue of justice appears relevant only because one has brought freedom into the discussion by force. The answer is that this is just because it is what God has decided, and he is the sole and ultimate standard of justice; therefore, this is just by definition. People might not like this because it contradicts their intuition of freedom, responsibility, and justice; however, theirs is a sinful intuition. They appeal to their intuition, even making it the basis on which all other considerations must turn, but they have ignored the noetic effects of sin.

Scripture teaches that every person has an innate knowledge of God in the sense that he knows about God, even some of his attributes and commands, by instinct, or by intuition, apart from observation and experience.⁴⁷ This knowledge resides in man's mind because God has directly imparted it to him as a creature made in the divine image. Biblical apologists sometimes mention this; however, this is different from appealing to intuition as a basis for argument.

Our innate knowledge of God is not established by intuition itself, but by revelation. We do not say, "We have an intuitive knowledge of God; therefore, we indeed have this knowledge, and this knowledge is true." Instead, we say, "God's revelation tells me that I have an intuitive knowledge of God; therefore, I indeed have an intuitive knowledge of God." And we say, "God's revelation tells me that my intuitive knowledge of God is true; therefore, my intuitive knowledge of God is true."

We also add, "God's revelation tells me that our intuitive knowledge of God has been suppressed and distorted by sin; therefore, although it is true that I have an intuitive knowledge of God, and although this intuitive knowledge of God is true, this intuition cannot function as a source of my theology or as justification for my premises in reasoning,

⁴⁷ See Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology, Ultimate Questions, and Presuppositional Confrontations*.

because I cannot accurately perceive and represent the information contained in this intuition. Rather, I need God's revelation to tell me what this intuitive knowledge contains and what to do with it."

When we refer to our intuitive knowledge of God, we are talking about a claim made by revelation about intuition. It is not a claim made by intuition about intuition, and not a claim made by intuition about revelation. We do not try to prove God's revelation by our intuition; rather, we are stating what God's revelation tells us that we know by intuition. This knowledge has been suppressed and distorted by sin, but we know even this only by revelation. Therefore, when we talk about intuition and our intuitive knowledge of God, we do this on a different basis than the one who have been refuting, and for a different purpose.

When we refer to what we know by intuition, we do not make a direct appeal to intuition, but we appeal to what God tells us that we know by intuition. In the context of theology and apologetics, we mention this as one of the reasons that sinners cannot excuse themselves. They know God by instinct, but they refuse to acknowledge him or worship him, to believe the gospel and to obey his commandments. We do not begin by saying that everyone knows God by intuition, so that there is no excuse for unbelief; rather, we begin by revelation, and then on the basis of revelation say that everyone knows God by intuition, and therefore there is no excuse for unbelief.

15. The Problem of Evil

INTRODUCTION

One of the most overrated objections against Christianity is the so-called "problem of evil." It claims that the existence of evil is logically irreconcilable with the Christian concept of God. The existence of evil is either assumed or supposedly established, and then this premise is said to be incompatible with the Christian concept of God. Thus it follows that there is no God, or at least it follows that what Christianity affirms about God is false.

Non-Christians have found considerable success with this argument, and those who claim to be Christians are themselves often disturbed by the existence of evil, or the amount of evil in this world. Some Christians manage to provide plausible but inconclusive answers, whereas others evade the challenge and call the existence of evil a mystery. However, merely plausible answers are insufficient when the Bible provides an infallible response and an invincible defense. And to the extent that the Bible addresses the topic, so that it is something that has been revealed, Christians have no right to call it a mystery as if it is something that is still unexplained.

The truth is that the existence of evil poses no challenge to the Christian doctrine of God, or to any aspect of the Christian faith. Moreover, non-Christian worldviews in fact cannot make sense of the existence of evil, if they can have a concept of evil at all.

THE PROBLEM

Christians affirm that God is omnipotent (all-powerful) and omnibenevolent (all-loving).⁴⁸ Our opponents reason that if God is all-powerful, then he possesses the ability to terminate evil, and if he is all-loving, then he wishes to terminate evil;⁴⁹ however, since evil still exists, this means that God does not exist, or at least it means that the things that Christians affirm about him are false. That is, even if God exists, since evil also exists, he cannot be both all-powerful and all-loving, but Christians insist that he is both all-powerful and all-loving; therefore, Christianity must be false.

There are different formulations of this argument, but regardless of the precise form that it takes, the claim is that Christians cannot affirm all the biblical divine attributes, because this would be logically incompatible with the existence of evil. And the claim is that, since this is the case, then Christianity must be false.

⁴⁸ The Bible teaches that "God is love" (1 John 4:8), but even Christians misunderstand this. This is the God who said, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated" (Romans 9:13). So the term "all-loving" can be misleading; however, it is often used by Christians and by those who discuss the problem of evil. In our answer, we will tolerate the term and its misleading connotations, and still refute the problem of evil.

⁴⁹ Sometimes the argument includes God's omniscience, that he is all-knowing. If God knows everything, then he knows how to destroy evil.

Although Christians have agonized over this so-called "problem of evil" for centuries, the argument is extremely easy to refute. Even as a child I thought it was a foolish argument, and it remains one of the most stupid objections that I have ever seen. Many people have trouble with the existence of evil not because it poses any logical challenge to Christianity, but because they are overwhelmed by the emotions that the topic generates, and these emotions disable the minimal level of judgment and intelligence that they normally exhibit.

Now, since our opponents claim that the problem of evil is a *logical* argument against Christianity, in our response we need to show only that the existence of evil does not generate a *logical* contradiction against what Christianity affirms about God. Although the Bible also offers answers regarding the emotional aspects of this topic, it is not our responsibility to present and defend these answers within the context of logical debate. So we will focus on the existence of evil as a logical challenge.

FREE WILL

Professing Christians, or those who claim to be Christians, often favor the "free will defense." There are indeed different ideas of free will and different versions of the free will defense. Nevertheless, with slight adaptations, what I say in this section will apply to all of them.

This approach states that when God created man, he granted free will to the creature, a free will to even rebel against the Creator. This is the ability to make decisions that are autonomous, that are not always actively predetermined and directly caused by God. Of course, God was aware that man would sin, but this is the price of granting free will to man. By creating man with free will, God also created the potential for evil, but as the free will defense goes, since man is truly free, the actualization of this potential for evil is blamed only on man. This depends on the assumption that responsibility presupposes freedom. Since this premise has never been established and it is in fact easily refuted, the free will defense fails without further consideration. But we will continue with the analysis. In any case, it is said that the potential or even the actualization of evil is not too high a price for granting free will to man.

Although Christians often employ the free will defense, and to some people the explanation sound reasonable, it is an irrational and unbiblical theodicy – it fails to answer the problem of evil, and it contradicts the Bible. First, this approach only postpones addressing the problem, in that it transforms the debate from why evil exists in God's universe to why God created a universe with the potential for such great evil. Second, Christians affirm that God is omniscient, so that when he created the universe and humankind he knew not only that they had the potential to become evil, but he knew for certain that they would become evil. Thus either directly or indirectly, God deliberately created evil.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ The doctrine of free will is unbiblical and heretical, and some have even followed the doctrine to its next logical step in saying that if man were to be truly free, then God cannot know for certain what man would do, thus denying the omniscience of God. But even then, God knew that it was possible for free will to produce extreme and horrendous evil, so that the same problem remains.

We may distinguish between natural evil and moral evil. Natural evil includes natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods, and moral evil refers to the wicked actions that rational creatures commit. Even if the free will defense provides a satisfactory explanation for moral evil, it fails to adequately address natural evil. Some Christians claim that it is moral evil that leads to natural evil; however, only God has the power to create a relationship between the two, so that earthquakes and floods do not have any necessary connections with murder and theft unless God makes it so – that is, unless God decides to cause earthquakes and floods because of the sins of his creatures. This occurred when God cursed the earth at Adam's transgression. So again God remains the cause of evil, whether natural or moral.

Even if Adam's sin had brought death and decay, not only to mankind but also to the animals, the Bible insists that not one sparrow can die apart from God's will (Matthew 10:29). That is, if there is any connection between moral evil and natural evil, the connection is not inherent, but sovereignly imposed by God. Even the seemingly insignificant cannot occur unless God actively wills it and causes it. Christians are not deists – we do not believe that this universe operates by a set of natural laws that are independent from God. The Bible shows us that God is now actively running the universe, so that nothing can happen or continue apart from his deliberate power and decree (Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 1:3). In reality, there are no natural laws. If we should use the term at all, what we call "natural laws" are only descriptions about how God regularly acts, although he is never bound to act in those ways.

Christians must reject the free will defense because the Bible rejects free will; rather, it teaches that God is the only one who possesses free will. He says in Isaiah 46:10, "My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please." On the other hand, man's will is enslaved either to sin or to righteousness: "But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness" (Romans 6:17-18). Man has no free will – it is an assumption without any biblical or rational warrant.

Another popular assumption is that moral responsibility presupposes moral ability. That is, if a person is unable to obey God's laws, then he should not be morally responsible for obeying these laws, and thus God should not and would not punish him for disobeying these laws. However, like the assumption that man has free will, this assumption that moral responsibility presupposes moral ability is also unbiblical and unjustified.

Referring to non-Christians, Paul writes, "The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (Romans 8:7). If it is true that moral responsibility presupposes moral ability, and Paul states that the sinner lacks this ability, then it follows that no sinner is responsible for his sins. If a sinner is only a sinner when he has the ability to obey but refuses to obey, then since Paul says that the sinner indeed lacks the ability to obey, then it follows that a sinner is not a sinner. This is a contradiction, and it is a contradiction that the Bible never teaches.

The Bible teaches that the non-Christian is a sinner, and at the same time it teaches that he lacks the ability to obey God. This means that man is morally responsible even if he lacks moral ability – man must obey God even if he cannot obey God. It is sinful for a person to disobey God whether or not he has the ability to do otherwise. Thus moral responsibility is not based on moral ability or freedom; rather, moral responsibility is based on God's sovereignty. Man must obey God's commands because God says that man must obey. It is irrelevant whether or not he has the ability or freedom to obey.

Free will is logically impossible. If we picture the exercise of the will as a movement of the mind toward a certain direction, the question arises as to what moves the mind, and why it moves toward where it moves.

To answer that the "self" moves the mind begs the question, since the mind is the self, and thus the same question remains. Why does the mind move toward one direction instead of another? If we trace the cause of its movement and direction to factors external to the mind, factors that impress themselves upon the consciousness from the outside and thus influencing or determining the decision, then how is this movement of the mind free? If we can trace the cause to the person's innate dispositions, then this movement of the mind is still not free, since although these innate dispositions decisively influence the decision, the person himself has not chosen these innate dispositions.

The same problem remains if we say that a person's decisions are determined by a mixture of his innate dispositions and external influences. If the mind makes decisions based on factors not chosen by the mind, then these choices are never free in the sense that they are not made apart from God's sovereign control – they are not free from God. Rather, the Bible teaches that God exercises immediate control over man's mind, and he also sovereignly determines all the innate dispositions and external factors related to man's will. It is God who forms a person in the womb, and it is he who arranges outward circumstances by his providence. Then, it is he who controls man's mind and cause each decision that he makes.

Therefore, although we affirm that man has a will as a function of the mind, so that the mind indeed makes choices, these are never free choices, because everything that has to do with every decision is determined by God, and on top of that it is in fact God who directly controls the mind to cause every decision. Since the will is never free from God, we should never use the free will theodicy when addressing the problem of evil.

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

Professing Christians are uncomfortable with the biblical teaching that man has no free will, because it appears to make God "responsible" for the existence and the continuation of evil. By their human standard, or by a standard that they invented and imposed on God, it makes him guilty of wrongdoing. In this section, I will provide an exposition on what the Bible teaches on the topic.

The Bible teaches that God's will determines everything. Nothing exists or happens without God, not merely permitting, but actively willing it and causing it to exist or happen:

I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please. (Isaiah 46:10)

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. (Matthew 10:29)

God controls not only natural events, but he also decides and causes all human affairs and decisions:

Blessed are those you choose and bring near to live in your courts! We are filled with the good things of your house, of your holy temple. (Psalm 65:4)

The LORD works out everything for his own ends – even the wicked for a day of disaster. (Proverbs 16:4)

In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps. (Proverbs 16:9)

A man's steps are directed by the LORD. How then can anyone understand his own way? (Proverbs 20:24)

The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases. (Proverbs 21:1)

Man's days are determined; you have decreed the number of his months and have set limits he cannot exceed. (Job 14:5)

All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: "What have you done?" (Daniel 4:35)

But as he left, he promised, "I will come back if it is God's will." Then he set sail from Ephesus. (Acts 18:21)

For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. (Philippians 2:13)

Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." (James 4:13-15)

"You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being." (Revelation 4:11)

If God indeed designs and causes all natural events and human affairs, then it follows that he also designs and causes evil. The Bible explicitly teaches this:

The LORD said to him, "Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the LORD?" (Exodus 4:11)

Who can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not decreed it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come? (Lamentations 3:37-38)

I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things. (Isaiah 45:7)

When a trumpet sounds in a city, do not the people tremble? When disaster comes to a city, has not the LORD caused it? (Amos 3:6)

The Bible insists that the greatest act of moral evil and injustice in human history was conceived and performed by God:

Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. (Isaiah 53:10)

Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. (Acts 4:27-28)

God decreed and caused the death of Christ for his own reason, namely, the redemption of his chosen ones. Likewise, he wills and causes evil for the worthy purpose of his glory. For this same reason, he created some people for salvation and some people for damnation:

I will say to the north, "Give them up!" and to the south, "Do not hold them back." Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth – everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made. (Isaiah 43:6-7)

In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of

his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1:11-12)

And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them. But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD. (Exodus 14:4)

For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath – prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory...? (Romans 9:17, 22-23)

God controls everything that exists and everything that happens. There is not one thing that exists or that happens that he has not decreed and caused – not even a single thought in the mind of man. Since this is true, it follows that God has decreed and caused the existence of evil. He has not merely permitted it, because nothing can originate or happen apart from his will and power. Since no creature can make free or independent decisions, evil could never have started unless God decreed and caused it, and it cannot continue for one moment longer without God's will for it to continue or without God's power actively causing it to continue.

Those who see that it is impossible to disassociate God from the origination and continuation of evil still attempt to distance God from evil by suggesting that God merely "permits" evil, and that he does not cause it. However, since the Bible itself states that God actively decrees and causes everything, and that nothing can exist or happen apart from his will and power, it makes no sense to say that he merely permits something – nothing happens by God's mere permission. In fact, when it comes to ontology, "God's permission" is an unintelligible term.

Since "in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28), from an ontological or metaphysical perspective, it is impossible to do anything at all without God's active power and control. Without him, a person cannot think or move. How, then, can evil be devised and committed without God's deliberate causation? How can one think evil apart from God's purpose and power? Instead of protecting God from the verdict of an unrighteous and irrational human standard while agreeing with this same standard, we ought to attack this human standard and refuse to let it stand in judgment over God, but instead agree with the Bible that God has decreed and caused evil, and that he is righteous in doing so.

David's census of Israel provides an example of evil that God decreed and caused in his creatures:

Again the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, "Go and take a census of Israel and Judah." (2 Samuel 24:1)

Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel. (1 Chronicles 21:1)

The two verses refer to the same incident. There is no contradiction if our view is true. God decreed that David would sin by taking the census, and he caused Satan to perform the temptation. Satan himself is a creature and has no free will. All his thoughts, decisions, and actions are controlled and caused by God. Then, God punished David for committing this sin (2 Samuel 24:10-14).

Although evil is negative, God's purpose, which is his own glory, is positive. God is the only one who possesses intrinsic worth, and if he decides that the existence of evil serves to glorify him, then the decree is by definition good and justified – because he thinks it is good and justified. Anyone who thinks that God's glory is not worth the death and suffering of billions of people, especially those who will be tortured in hell forever, has too high an opinion of himself and humanity. A creature's worth is conferred by his creator, according to the purpose for which the creator made him. Since God is the sole standard of measurement, if he thinks that something is justified, then it is by definition justified. Christians should have no trouble with this, and those who find it difficult to accept what the Bible teaches should examine their spiritual condition, to see if they are indeed in the faith.

Many people, including those who claim to be Christians, would challenge God's right and justice in decreeing and causing the existence of evil for his own purpose. Paul anticipates a similar objection when he discusses the doctrine of election, in which God creates some people for salvation and creates some for damnation:

One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? (Romans 9:19-21)

Paul says, in effect, "Of course the creator has the right to do whatever he wants with his creatures. And who are you to make such an objection in the first place?" A supposedly Christian writer objects that man is greater than a lump of clay. This complaint backfires. First, this is a biblical analogy, and a true Christian will not challenge it. But if one challenges it, then this becomes a general debate against a non-Christian, and it is no longer only about the problem of evil. Since we are offering a Christian answer to the problem of evil, denying biblical infallibility is not an option. Second, if man is more than a lump of clay, then God is infinitely greater than a potter. Thus the objection not only fails, but it reminds us that the distance between God and man is even greater than that represented by

the potter and the clay. The analogy is proper when we grasp its point, that is, God as creator has the right to do whatever he wishes with his creatures. "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (Romans 9:18).

When a person refuses to accept that God would decree and create evil, it implies that he finds something wrong with God decreeing and creating evil. What is the standard of right and wrong by which this person judges God's actions? If there is a moral standard superior to God, to which God himself is accountable and by which God himself is judged, then this "God" is not God at all, but this higher standard would be God. But the Christian concept of God refers to the highest being and standard, so there is nothing higher. If there is something higher than the "God" that a person argues against, then this person is not referring to the Christian God. There is no standard higher than God to which God himself is accountable and by which God himself is judged. Therefore, it is impossible to accuse God of doing anything morally wrong.

Jesus says that only God is good (Luke 18:19), so that all "goodness" in other things can only be derived. God's nature defines goodness itself, and since he "does not change like shifting shadows" (James 1:17), he is the sole and constant standard of goodness. No matter how moral I am, one cannot consider me the objective standard of goodness, because even the word "moral" is meaningless unless it is used relative to God's character. That is, how "moral" a person is refers to the degree of conformity of his character to God's character. To the degree that a person thinks and acts in accordance with God's nature and commands, he is moral. Otherwise, there is no moral difference between altruism and selfishness; virtue and vice are meaningless concepts; rape and murder are not crimes, but amoral events.

There is no standard of goodness or righteousness apart from God to judge what he says and does; rather, whatever he says and does is a revelation of the standard of goodness and righteousness. Since God calls himself good, and since God has defined goodness for us by revealing his nature and commands, evil is thus defined as anything that is contrary to his nature and commands. Since God is good, and since he is the only definition of goodness, it is also good that he decreed and caused the existence of evil. There is no standard of good and evil by which we can denounce his decree and action as wrong or evil. This does not mean that evil is good – that would be a contradiction – but it means that God's decree and causation of evil are good.

Hebrews 6:13 says, "When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself." There is no one to hold God accountable, and no one can drag God to a court to press charges against him. No one judges God, but every person is judged by him.

Though one wished to dispute with him, he could not answer him one time out of a thousand. His wisdom is profound, his power is vast. Who has resisted him and come out unscathed? He moves mountains without their knowing it and overturns them in his anger. He shakes the earth

from its place and makes its pillars tremble. He speaks to the sun and it does not shine; he seals off the light of the stars. He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea. He is the Maker of the Bear and Orion, the Pleiades and the constellations of the south. He performs wonders that cannot be fathomed, miracles that cannot be counted. When he passes me, I cannot see him; when he goes by, I cannot perceive him. If he snatches away, who can stop him? Who can say to him, "What are you doing?" (Job 9:3-12)

"Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!" Then Job answered the LORD: "I am unworthy – how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer – twice, but I will say no more." Then the LORD spoke to Job out of the storm: "Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?" (Job 40:2-8)

Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker, to him who is but a potsherd among the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, "What are you making?" Does your work say, "He has no hands?" Woe to him who says to his father, "What have you begotten?" or to his mother, "What have you brought to birth?" This is what the LORD says – the Holy One of Israel, and its Maker: Concerning things to come, do you question me about my children, or give me orders about the work of my hands? (Isaiah 45:9-11)

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen. (Romans 11:33-36)

Since we derive our very concept and definition of goodness from God, to accuse him of evil would be to say that good is evil, which is a contradiction. Therefore, men cannot say, "Because God is good (according to our false standard of goodness), he must not and would not do this or that." Instead, we must say, "Because God is good (according to his own standard of good, which is the only true standard of good), if he does this or that, then it must be good." Thus if God has decreed and caused evil, then while evil is evil, it must be good that he has decreed and caused evil.

THE SOLUTION

As we consider the biblical answer to the problem of evil, let us first repeat the unbeliever's argument:

1. The Christian God is all-powerful and all-loving.

2. If he is all-powerful, then he is able to end all evil.
3. If he is all-loving, then he wants to end all evil.
4. But evil still exists.
5. Therefore, the Christian God does not exist.⁵¹

The argument encounters an insuperable obstacle by the time we reach premise 3, since the non-Christian cannot find a definition of love that upholds this premise without destroying the argument. By what definition of love can we assert that an all-loving God would want to destroy evil? Or, by what definition of love can we assert that an all-loving God would have already destroyed evil?

If this definition of love comes from outside of the Bible, then why must the biblical worldview answer to it? To form this argument using a non-biblical definition of love would make the argument irrelevant as a challenge to Christianity. But if we take the definition of love from the Bible, then the one who uses this argument must show that the Bible itself defines love in a way that requires an all-loving God to destroy evil, or to have already destroyed evil. Unless the non-Christian can defend premise 3, the argument from the problem of evil fails before we even finish reading it.

If the non-Christian uses a non-biblical definition of love in premise 1, then the argument commits a straw man fallacy from the start. If he uses the biblical definition of love in premise 1, but uses a non-biblical definition of love in premise 3, then he commits the fallacy of equivocation. Then the most that the argument accomplishes is to point out that he has a non-biblical definition of love, but the argument would be irrelevant as a challenge to Christianity.

On the other hand, if he tries to use the biblical definition of love, then for his argument to be relevant, the Bible itself would have to define love in a way that requires God to destroy evil, or to have already destroyed evil. However, although the Bible teaches that God is loving, it also teaches that there is evil in this world, and that this evil is under God's complete and sovereign control. Therefore, the Bible denies that there is any contradiction between the love of God and the existence of evil, but it defines love in a way that is consistent with God's control and causation of evil. As with the definition of goodness, Christians do not invent their own idea of love and make God conform to it; rather, they receive their definition of love from God.

For the argument from the problem of evil to stand, the non-Christian must establish the premise, "The love of God contradicts the existence of evil," or something to that effect. But the Bible does not affirm this premise, and if the non-Christian argues for this premise with definitions of love and evil found in his own non-biblical worldview, then he can succeed only in showing that the biblical worldview is different from the non-biblical worldview. We already know this, or there would be no conflict between the worldviews, but what has become of the problem of evil? The non-Christian points to the biblical teaching about God's love, then smuggles in a non-biblical definition of love that requires

⁵¹ There are different formulations of the argument, but with slight adaptations, my refutation will apply to all of them.

God to destroy evil, and after that stupidly boasts in the "contradiction" that he has produced.

If a person wants to challenge the Bible or hold the Bible accountable for what it says, then he must first let it define its own terms; otherwise, he would be challenging only what the Bible does not say, and this makes all his arguments irrelevant. The unbeliever must demonstrate why God's love necessarily implies that he must destroy evil or that he desires to destroy evil, or that it necessarily implies that he must have destroyed evil or that he desires to have already destroyed evil.

It would not help to say something like, "Because a loving God would want to relieve suffering," since this only restates the premise in different words, and the same question remains. Why must a loving God desire to relieve suffering? How does one define suffering in the first place? If the non-Christian cannot define either love or suffering, or if he cannot logically impose his definitions on the Christian, then his premise amounts to saying that a God with an undefined attribute X must desire to destroy or to have destroyed an undefined Y. But if he can define neither X nor Y, then he has no intelligible premise from which to construct an intelligible argument against the Christian faith. The whole argument is gibberish.

Another one might say, "Because God would want to triumph over evil." Again, what is the definition of "triumph"? If God himself is the direct cause of evil, and if God exercises total and constant control over it, so that evil is always doing precisely what God designs and causes, in exactly the manner and degree that he designs and causes it, then in what sense could he ever "lose" to evil? Whatever the non-Christian says, he encounters the same problem, and it is impossible for him to establish that the love of God contradicts the existence of evil. The more arguments he offers, the more he shows his lack of intelligence and competence.

Since the Bible affirms both the love of God and the existence of evil, from the Bible's perspective the love of God does not imply that he must destroy evil or that he must have already destroyed it. Of course a non-biblical perspective may not agree with this, but again, this shows only that the biblical worldview disagrees with non-biblical worldviews, which we already know, and which is the reason for debate.

As long as the non-Christian fails to establish the premise that the love of God contradicts the existence of evil, the Christian is under no obligation to show any regard to the problem of evil as an argument against Christianity. In fact, since the non-Christian fails to define some of the key terms and to establish the key premises, logically speaking no one can even understand the argument. There is no actual objection. There is no intelligible argument for us to answer.

If we stop here, we will have already refuted the so-called problem of evil, since we have demonstrated that there is no such problem at all. However, so that the discussion can continue, we will now temporarily grant the non-Christian's premise. That is, for the sake of argument, we will pretend by force that the love of God somehow contradicts the

existence of evil, while keeping in mind that this is something that the Bible never teaches, and that the non-Christians have never established.

The non-Christian argues that given the existence of evil, the existence of God is logically impossible. In response, we have shown that the non-Christian cannot establish the premise that an all-loving God must necessarily destroy evil or desire to destroy evil. In fact, in the Bible, love is attributed to a God who directly designs and causes evil. Now we will take an additional step and point out that the premises of the argument do not necessarily lead to the non-Christian's conclusion in the first place, but very different conclusions are possible:

1. The Christian God is all-powerful and all-loving.
2. If he is all-powerful, then he is able to end all evil.
3. If he is all-loving, then he wants to end all evil.
4. But evil still exists.
5. Therefore, *God has a good purpose for evil.*

1. The Christian God is all-powerful and all-loving.
2. If he is all-powerful, then he is able to end all evil.
3. If he is all-loving, then he wants to end all evil.
4. But evil still exists.
5. Therefore, *God will eventually destroy evil.*

In a valid argument, the premises must necessarily and inevitably lead to the conclusion. However, in the argument from the problem of evil, the premises do not necessarily and inevitably lead to the conclusion. Therefore, the argument from the problem of evil is invalid.

Some non-Christians might say that if God has a good purpose for evil, then Christians must also state the purpose. But the non-Christians cannot show why the Christians must state this purpose. The debate is on whether the premises necessarily and inevitably lead to the non-Christian's conclusion. Whether or not there is a good purpose for evil, and whether or not the Christians can state this purpose, is irrelevant. The Bible indeed explains God's purpose for evil,⁵² but it is not logically relevant to the debate.

There is more. The non-Christian argues that God does not exist because evil exists, and we have refuted this. Now we should add that the existence of God – what the Bible means by "God" – is in fact the logical prerequisite for the existence of evil. That is, evil is undefined and meaningless without an objective and absolute standard of right and wrong, good and evil, and this standard can only be God.

When the non-Christian states that evil exists, what does he mean by "evil"? He might be referring to greed, hate, murder, rape, earthquakes, floods and a number of other things. However, on what basis and by what standard does he call these things evil? Does he call these things evil just because he disapproves of them? Any definition or standard of evil

⁵² See Romans 9:22-24 for one explanation.

that he asserts without appealing to God and the Bible will be unsuccessful and easily defeated.

If the non-Christian claims that murder is wrong because it violates the victim's right to life, why does the victim have the right to life? Who gives him this right? And why must anyone acknowledge this right? Who says that there is anything as a right in the first place? Non-Christians have tried many arguments, but all of them have been exposed as stupid and arbitrary.

On the other hand, the Christian affirms that murder is wrong, immoral, and evil because God forbids murder: "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13); "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man" (Genesis 9:6). The Christian worldview can assert with authority that murder is evil and that the murderer must be held accountable, but the non-Christian can never justify the same claim. He cannot even define murder.

The non-Christian claims that evil exists, and from that basis he evaluates what Christianity says about God. He uses something that he claims to be obvious to refute something that he claims to be unobvious. However, the existence of evil is not obvious at all unless there is an absolute, objective, and universal moral standard, and we know this standard, so that we can make evaluations with it. Since the non-Christian fails to establish such a standard, and since he fails to establish how he would know such a standard, all his talk about evil is unintelligible and meaningless, and his argument from the problem of evil has no effect against Christianity. In fact, on the basis of his worldview, even he does not know what his own argument means.

One who denies the existence of God has no rational basis to affirm the existence of evil. The recognition of God logically precedes the recognition of evil. Unless God is presupposed, evil remains undefined. When the non-Christian uses the problem of evil to argue against Christianity, he becomes an intellectual terrorist, so that he hijacks the moral absolute of Christianity even as he argues against Christianity. However, he cannot refer to any natural or moral evil without implicitly acknowledging a standard by which to judge something as evil. If he acknowledges the existence of evil, then he must first acknowledge the existence of God, but if he already acknowledges the existence of God, then the argument from the problem of evil is pointless.

Of course, the non-Christian may not immediately surrender, but he will probably try to offer some workable definition of evil to rescue his argument. We cannot consider all the possible definitions that he might propose, but there is enough material here so that anyone should be able to refute any non-Christian definition. If the Christian will persistently demand justification for the unbeliever's claims and definitions, he will frustrate any attempt to construct an argument against Christianity based on the existence of evil.

Some non-Christians have come to realize that the argument from the problem of evil is invalid, so that although they continue to challenge the Christian faith based on the existence of evil, they have softened their claim. They say that although the existence of

evil does not logically contradict the existence of God, the existence of evil at least provides strong evidence against God's existence, or against the probability of God's existence. Instead of calling their argument a logical case against God's existence, they call it an evidential case against God's existence.⁵³

This is nonsense. It is just a dishonest way of saying that they have no argument. All the problems that I raised about the "logical" case remain in the "evidential" case. The argument still fails to establish that the love of God contradicts the existence of evil, or that the love of God requires him to destroy evil, or to have destroyed evil. It still fails to define the crucial terms. What is love? What is evil? In fact, the argument makes things worse for the non-Christians by introducing the idea of "evidence." Now I demand from them several additional things: a definition of evidence, a standard for determining what constitutes evidence toward or against something, a standard for determining the relevance and force of the alleged evidence, and an epistemology for discovering the things that are used as evidence.

Along with the "evidential" case, some people include the claim that there is too much "gratuitous" evil, and that this is evidence against God's existence. Again, what is evidence? And who decides what is "gratuitous"?⁵⁴ By what standard of necessity do we decide that an evil event is unnecessary? And unnecessary for what? And why does evil have to be necessary in the first place? In the biblical worldview, when God does something, it is justified just because he has decided to do it. Thus the non-Christian cannot argue against the Christian faith by appealing to unjustified events, since he must first refute the Christian faith before he can show that these events are unjustified. So the non-Christian argues against the Christian idea of God by using non-Christian definitions of love, evil, evidence, necessity, and other key terms. Then why not also argue against a non-

⁵³ Some people use different terms to make this same distinction.

⁵⁴ On this point, even some professional philosophers stoop to an appeal to popular opinion. They claim that "everybody knows" that certain things are evil, and that certain things are gratuitous evil. In another context, these same philosophers would blast such an appeal to popular opinion to establish a pivotal premise. The fact that they resort to this tactic shows that they are stupid and desperate. The most obvious response is that it is fallacious to think that something is true just because many or even most people think that it is true.

Some philosophers argue that if most people think that there is gratuitous evil, then the burden of proof falls on the Christian to show that there is no gratuitous evil. Although I disagree that the burden of proof falls on me just because I contradict popular opinion, even if it does, I have shown that any evil that God decrees and causes is justified by definition, so that the burden of proof returns to the non-Christian, who must either refute this particular point or refute Christianity as a whole.

Moreover, even if the appeal to popular opinion is somehow legitimate, I demand proof that it is indeed the popular opinion that there is gratuitous evil. How can the non-Christian establish this claim? Even if he can perform a global empirical survey, I have refuted empiricism in several places. In addition, I demand justification that he should limit his survey to only the present generation. If he cannot do this, then he must also show that since the origin of mankind, it has been the popular opinion that there is gratuitous evil. He must also prove that this will continue to be the popular opinion in all future generations. If he fails to do this, then I have no reason to accept his claim that "everybody knows" there is evil, or gratuitous evil. He thinks that "everybody knows," but he does not know that "everybody knows" – it is his singular opinion about popular opinion.

Christian idea of God and leave us out of the debate altogether? The argument from the problem of evil is best used by non-Christians against non-Christians.

OTHER WORLDVIEWS

There is no reason for lengthy explanations and repetitions, since the matter is as simple as it appears. The argument from the problem of evil is one of the most irrational arguments ever devised, and it is used by the most stupid individuals, but it has deceived and troubled many people because of its emotional appeal. In response, the Christian must not only neutralize the argument, but he must pursue and attack the non-Christian on this topic.

Perhaps because the problem of evil is most often used as a challenge to the Christian faith, many people forget to consider whether non-Christian worldviews and religions can provide adequate and coherent answers about the existence of evil. Can non-Christians provide an authoritative definition of evil? Does their definition of evil contradict what they claim about physics (natural evil) and psychology (moral evil)? Can they explain how and why evil began and continues? Can they suggest a solution for evil, and can they guarantee that this solution will succeed? No worldview except the Christian faith can even begin to answer these challenges.

When a non-Christian confronts you with the problem of evil, instead of being pressed into a corner, you should be able to give an invincible answer. But do not stop there. You should turn the argument against the non-Christian and ceaselessly pursue him and attack him with it (2 Corinthians 10:5). Run him off the cliff and make him regret ever mentioning it:

"I have demonstrated that the existence of evil does not contradict the love of God or the existence of God. In fact, the very concept of evil presupposes the existence of God. This God decreed and caused the existence of evil for his own glory, and every aspect and instance of evil is under his precise control, and there is no standard higher than God to judge him as unrighteous. One day he will banish all sinners to endless torment in hell, so that every instance of murder, theft, rape, and even every word that a man has spoken, will be accounted for. He will justly punish all sinners who have not trusted Jesus Christ for salvation, but his chosen ones will surely be saved through faith.

"What about you? Huh?! How do you explain evil? How do you deal with it? Given your worldview, how can you even have a meaningful and universal concept of evil? How do you explain its origin and continuation? Can you offer an effective or even a guaranteed solution to defeat evil? Can you set forth universally applicable and binding reasons against such things as genocide and racism? How can your worldview make moral demands on someone that does not subscribe to this worldview? Given your worldview, is there final and perfect justice for anyone? If not, what is your solution or explanation for that? How can you define justice in the first place? Why must a person from another

nation or culture recognize your so-called rights? You questioned me. You think I cannot question you? Huh? Answer me!

"If you cannot answer these and thousands of other questions that I have for you on the basis of your worldview and your intellectual commitments without spouting self-contradictions, arbitrary and unjustified assertions, and meaningless terms and propositions, then it is evident that while the existence of evil poses no threat to the Christian faith, it means the destruction of your pathetic and ridiculous non-Christian worldview or religion. You are a fool and a hypocrite for even mentioning the existence of evil as an objection to Christianity. You should hate yourself and apologize for wasting my time and for slandering the Christian faith."

Although many people enjoy confronting Christians with the problem of evil, the truth is that the Christian faith is the only worldview in which the existence of evil does not present a logical problem. Nevertheless, Christians are often intimidated by non-Christian arguments. This is in part because they have not learned the refutations to these arguments, but also because they sometimes agree with the non-Christians, at least on the emotional level. But the fact that something causes an emotional disturbance in people does nothing to threaten the Christian faith itself.

Nevertheless, the Bible addresses even the emotional aspect of the issue: "You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you" (Isaiah 26:3). And Psalm 73:16-17 says, "When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny." Only by embracing the Christian worldview can a person come to a rational position on the existence of evil, and only by entering "the sanctuary of God" can the topic cease to be "oppressive." Only those who draw close to God can understand the reality of evil and retain emotional soundness. The Christian faith is true and is the only way to God and salvation. It is immune to intellectual attacks. It cannot be successfully challenged, but only studied and obeyed.

If the non-Christian is so disturbed over the existence of evil, he can ask a Christian how to trust Jesus Christ for salvation. Or he can commit himself to a psychiatric ward where he may remain miserable under professional care. Oh non-Christian! You are stupid. You are depressed. And you are going insane. Still, you do not come to Jesus Christ for salvation, but you lash out against him in desperate rebellion. Look how far humanity has fallen, that it would produce a piece of garbage like you! But there is hope in Jesus. Come to him now. Call upon him in repentance, and he will save your foolish and wretched soul.

16. The Preservation of the Saints

INTRODUCTION

Our topic is the Reformed doctrine of the perseverance or preservation of the saints. In the study of theology, it falls under soteriology. It is the final item in "The Five Points of Calvinism," designated by the "P" in the acronym TULIP, referring to "the perseverance of the saints." The doctrine asserts that once a person becomes a true Christian, he never truly and finally turns away from his faith, and that he can never truly and finally become a non-Christian again. Therefore, once a person truly converts and becomes a believer, he will surely be saved.

THEOLOGICAL EXPRESSIONS

This teaching is designated by several different expressions. Although some may be better than others in that they contain more information about the doctrine, all of them are accurate, and each carries important theological implications.

Eternal Security

The term "eternal security" suggests that the believer's salvation is safe – it is not in danger, and it will not be taken away.

Although the word "security" stresses the final result, it does not tell us, by whose will, by what power, in what state, and by what means the believer's salvation is secured and kept safe; nevertheless, the word is accurate as far as it goes.

As for "eternal," if it is understood as denoting an endless duration, then it is synonymous with "everlasting," and thus emphasizes the perpetual nature of the believer's security. It is not something that will last for a while and then dissipates; it is something that will last forever.

Although some people have in mind mainly this emphasis when using the expression, its meaning becomes even richer if we also understand the word "eternal" as referring to the eternal decree of God in election. That is, "eternal" can also refer to God's sovereign and immutable decree in timeless eternity for the salvation of his chosen ones. In other words, a believer's salvation is forever secure because in eternity God has decreed the salvation of this individual.

Once Saved, Always Saved

Another popular description of the doctrine is "once saved, always saved." It clearly conveys the idea that once a person is saved, his salvation continues unchanged and uninterrupted for "always."

Again, although this description is accurate as far as it goes, it does not tell us by whose will, by what power, in what state, and by what means the believer's salvation perpetuates once it began. The description does not in itself contain any information that would counteract the false accusations that are often leveled against this doctrine.

In addition, in itself the expression is too broad to exclude unbiblical versions of the doctrine. For example, some people affirm that once a person professes Christianity, then he is "saved," and he will never lose his salvation regardless of his subsequent beliefs and actions. However, this is not the biblical version of the "once saved, always saved" doctrine.

The Perseverance of the Saints

Calvinists frequently employ the expression, "the perseverance of the saints," when referring to the doctrine.

In some ways, this expression is superior to the previous two. First, it includes more relevant information, in that it states not only the result, but also the state in which a believer's salvation remains secure. Specifically, it conveys the idea that a believer spiritually and morally persists in the converted condition. It implies that that he faces temptations and difficulties in his walk with God, but that he "perseveres" through these challenges.

This in turn counteracts the misunderstanding that one who once professes Christianity can abandon his faith and permanently return to sin, and still be saved. Instead, this expression points out that a person who has been saved remains saved in that he perseveres against temptations and difficulties.

Nevertheless, this expression still allows for misunderstandings and distortions. Although it tells us in what state a believer remains saved, it does not tell us by whose will, by what power, and by what means he perseveres. It leaves room for one to think that, once converted, a believer then has within himself the will and the power to forever persevere through all temptations and difficulties, even if he does not possess this disposition and ability before conversion. This is still not the biblical version of the doctrine. Of course, the expression does not necessitate this distortion, but neither does it directly exclude it.

The Preservation of the Saints

Perhaps the best expression to describe the doctrine is "the preservation of the saints" – it is rich in content, and biblical in emphasis.

Like all the previous expressions for this doctrine, this one tells us something about the end result, that a believer will remain forever saved. But it tells us much more than this. As with "the perseverance of the saints," the idea of "preservation" implies that the believer will truly and finally remain in the positive spiritual and moral condition that regeneration has produced in him.

In addition, it tells us that the reason a believer perseveres in his regenerated and converted state is because he is "preserved." This implies the believer's continual dependence on the grace of God, and that a believer remains saved because of the will and the power of God, and not the will and the power of man. Moreover, to be "preserved" implies that one is protected against some hostile forces and influences, and thus conveys the idea that the believer continues to face temptations and difficulties after conversion, only that God preserves him, so that his faith does not fail.

Therefore, this expression has the advantage of including much relevant information, if not by direct assertion, then at least by implication. It honors the work of God, excludes the boasting of man, and reflects the biblical emphasis on the sovereign grace and active power of God throughout the elect's salvation, from conversion to consummation.

Of course, this expression still does not say all that can and should be said about the doctrine. It does not adequately and equally emphasize its every aspect, and neither does it directly exclude all distortions and misunderstandings. Also, it does not tell us about the means by which God uses to preserve us other than the implication that it involves his active power. Nevertheless, for a short expression, this is probably the best, in that it is the most God-centered, and refers to all relevant aspects of this doctrine, at least by implication.

REFORMED CONFESSIONS

Since our current interest is the Reformed understanding of the preservation of the saints, it is appropriate to examine several Reformed confessions. These documents provide us with historical, formal, and systematic expressions of the Reformed faith. All of the following confessions contain some statements that are relevant to the doctrine.

The Scots Confession

We begin by looking at The Scots Confession of 1560. Mainly written by John Knox, it contains no section narrowly addressing the preservation of the saints; however, the following paragraphs from chapters XII and XIII are sufficient to establish a clear position on the subject:

XII. To put this even more plainly; as we willingly disclaim any honor and glory for our own creation and redemption, so do we willingly also for our regeneration and sanctification; for by ourselves we are not capable of thinking one good thought, but he who has begun the work in us alone continues us in it, to the praise and glory of his undeserved grace.

This is an excellent place to start, because it shows how the Reformed view of the preservation of the saints is integrated within the context of the general pattern of biblical soteriology. That is, biblical soteriology presents salvation as something that truly and

wholly comes from God, and that it works out in the lives of the chosen ones in such a way as to exclude all human boasting.

Because men are completely depraved and helpless, it is only by God's sovereign grace and power that the elect are regenerated – it is God who must begin this good work in us. Then, it is he who "alone continues us in it, to the praise and glory of his undeserved grace." Notice that it is he "alone" who causes us to continue, so that no credit is due to man. Both conversion and sanctification completely depend on sovereign grace.

XIII. The cause of good works, we confess, is not our free will, but the Spirit of the Lord Jesus, who dwells in our hearts by true faith, brings forth such works as God has prepared for us to walk in. For we most boldly affirm that it is blasphemy to say that Christ abides in the hearts of those in whom is no spirit of sanctification. Therefore we do not hesitate to affirm that murderers, oppressors, cruel persecutors, adulterers, filthy persons, idolaters, drunkards, thieves, and all works of iniquity, have neither true faith nor anything of the Spirit of the Lord Jesus, so long as they obstinately continue in wickedness. For as soon as the Spirit of the Lord Jesus, whom God's chosen children receive by true faith, takes possession of the heart of any man, so soon does he regenerate and renew him, so that he begins to hate what before he loved, and to love what he hated before....But the Spirit of God, who bears witness to our spirit that we are the sons of God, makes us resist filthy pleasures and groan in God's presence for deliverance from this bondage of corruption, and finally to triumph over sin so that it does not reign in our mortal bodies....But the sons of God fight against sin; sob and mourn when they find themselves tempted to do evil; and, if they fall, rise again with earnest and unfeigned repentance. They do these things, not by their own power, but by the power of the Lord Jesus, apart from whom they can do nothing.

Chapter XIII continues to set up good theological reasons for integrating the preservation of the saints with a coherent and biblical view of soteriology. It states that a real inner transformation occurs in the person at regeneration. The believer then continues in his new spiritual direction because he is no longer the same as before. Regeneration is not simply a short-lived experience after which the spiritual disposition of the person remains uncertain; rather, it is a fundamental and permanent transformation caused and sustained by the Spirit of God, who now indwells the believer.

This does not mean that regeneration imparts to the believer a new power in the sense that he can now function to produce spiritual good apart from the continual grace and power of God. This Confession explicitly denies that a person produces good works by any human "free will" even after he has been regenerated.

Instead, it says that "the cause of good works" in believers is "the Spirit of the Lord Jesus" who dwells in us through faith, which is also a gift from God. In addition, the very good

works that we perform have been "prepared for us" by God. This points out to us that God's foreordination, his eternal decree, has not predetermined only our conversion, but also our sanctification. It is not as if God predetermined that we would be saved, and then left subsequent events uncertain. Instead, he has predetermined both the conversion and the sanctification of his chosen ones, foreordaining the very good works that they would perform after their regeneration.

Therefore, just as "free will" is not an issue in conversion, "free will" is not an issue in sanctification. It is God's will that causes conversion, and it is God's will that causes sanctification, and this means that the perseverance of the saints is not subject to their own weaknesses, but to God's powerful preservation.

However, this does not deny that believers continue to face temptations and difficulties after their conversion. In fact, at times they even fall into serious sins, although even these failures occur by the sovereign will and power of God. The difference is that, because of God's foreordination and preservation, the chosen ones "sob and mourn when they find themselves tempted to do evil; and, if they fall, rise again with earnest and unfeigned repentance."

The Confession then repeats the emphasis that, "They do these things, not by their own power, but by the power of the Lord Jesus, apart from whom they can do nothing." Again, the believers do not persevere because they have a "free will" to choose good after regeneration, but because it is God's will to preserve them by his power, and he has decided that they would "finally triumph over sin." It is unscriptural to say that a man's will is under bondage to sin before conversion, but that he has "free will" after conversion. Scripture teaches that man is bound to wickedness before conversion, and that he is bound to righteousness after conversion.

It follows that those who demonstrate no real change in thought and conduct, and those who do not persevere in holiness, have never been converted in the first place. And the Confession boldly declares that it is "blasphemy" to say that a man can be a true believer and at the same time be without the "spirit of sanctification." All those who "obstinately continue in wickedness" have never been converted, even if they claim to be believers.

The Heidelberg Catechism

Second, we come to The Heidelberg Catechism (1563). Like the Scots Confession, this German catechism of Reformed doctrine contains no question or set of questions specifically designed to address the preservation of the saints. However, it includes numerous references to the doctrine throughout the Catechism, from which we can derive a definite position on the subject:

Q. 1. What is your only comfort, in life and in death?

A. That I belong – body and soul, in life and in death – not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father

in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

This first question in the Catechism introduces something new to our discussion, namely, the implication of Christ's effective particular atonement for the preservation of the saints. Opponents of the doctrine must invariably place the focus of perseverance upon the believers themselves, as if God has no final say on the matter. In contrast, the Reformed confessions agree with Scripture that God is really the only one who has any say on the matter.

Thus when we consider the perseverance of the saints, we must not deal with only what the saints can or would do, but what Christ has done and is doing. Now, by his redemptive work, Christ actually purchased the chosen ones, the elect. He bought them, and he owns them. Therefore, the Catechism begins by pointing out that the believer belongs to Christ, who protects and preserves the believer. It also points out that God has foreordained all things to "fit his purpose for my salvation," and it is the Holy Spirit who "makes me...willing and ready from now on to live for him."

For this reason, it is not entirely accurate to say that God has regenerated the believer so that he can "freely" choose that which is good – the word "freely" must at best be used only relative to sin, and not relative to God. Rather, even after regeneration, it is God who causes the believer's will to choose that which is good. Since "his purpose" never changes, the believer's foreordained destiny never changes.

Q. 31. Why is he called Christ, that is, the Anointed?

A. Because he is ordained by God the Father and anointed with the Holy Spirit to be our chief Priest and Teacher, fully revealing to us the secret purpose and will of God concerning our redemption; to be our only High Priest, having redeemed us by the one sacrifice of his body and ever interceding for us with the Father; and to be our eternal King, governing us by his Word and Spirit, and defending and sustaining us in the redemption he has won for us.

This question points out that Christ is "defending and sustaining us in the redemption he has won for us" as part of his ministry as Mediator. He intercedes for us with the Father, who always hears him. Therefore, the preservation of the elect is as certain as the permanence and effectiveness of Christ's ministry as King and Priest.

Q. 49. What benefit do we receive from Christ's ascension into heaven?

A. First, that he is our Advocate in the presence of his Father in heaven. Second, that we have our flesh in heaven as a sure pledge that he, as the Head, will also take us, his members, up to himself. Third, that he sends us his Spirit as a counterpledge by whose power we seek what is above,

where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God, and not things that are on earth.

Because the believer is joined to Christ in inseparable union, the ascension of Christ into heaven necessarily implies that the believer is also guaranteed a place in heaven.

Q. 54. What do you believe concerning "the Holy Catholic Church"?

A. I believe that, from the beginning to the end of the world, and from among the whole human race, the Son of God, by his Spirit and his Word, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself, in the unity of the true faith, a congregation chosen for eternal life. Moreover, I believe that I am and forever will remain a living member of it.

Again, the emphasis should not be placed upon the believers' perseverance, but God's powerful preservation, causing the believers' perseverance. Thus the doctrine cannot be attacked based on the weaknesses or the capriciousness of the creatures. It is Christ who "gathers, protects, and preserves" his elect, those whom God has "chosen for eternal life." Because of this, once a person becomes a believer in Christ, he "forever will remain a living member of it."

Q. 56. What do you believe concerning "the forgiveness of sins"?

A. That, for the sake of Christ's reconciling work, God will no more remember my sins or the sinfulness with which I have to struggle all my life long; but that he graciously imparts to me the righteousness of Christ so that I may never come into condemnation.

This question refers to the imparted righteousness that every believer receives from God because of Christ, or the doctrine of justification. It points out that the effect of justification in Christ is that one "may *never* come into condemnation."

Q. 64. But does not this teaching make people careless and sinful?

A. No, for it is impossible for those who are ingrafted into Christ by true faith not to bring forth the fruit of gratitude.

If the believer will "never come into condemnation," then the question becomes whether this leads to spiritual recklessness and moral licentiousness. It does not, because one who has been justified by God has received not only imparted righteousness, but also a new nature. He is now united with Christ as a branch is united with the tree, so that he naturally and necessarily bears fruit that corresponds to the nature of the tree. Union with Christ results in Christ-like thinking and behavior in the believer.

Q. 87. Can those who do not turn to God from their ungrateful, impenitent life be saved?

A. Certainly not! Scripture says, "Surely you know that the unjust will never come into possession of the kingdom of God. Make no mistake: no fornicator or idolator, none who are guilty either of adultery or of

homosexual perversion, no thieves or grabbers or drunkards or slanderers or swindlers, will possess the kingdom of God."

The previous questions are already sufficient to exclude nominal believers, or those who outwardly profess the faith without truly affirming it. To become a true believer, a person must have been first chosen by God in eternity, then regenerated and converted in history. Mere profession does not indicate election or conversion. Scripture warns us against deception: As long as a person remains an unrepentant sinner, he is an unbeliever regardless of what he verbally professes. This means that one cannot cite those who profess the faith and then fall away as examples against the doctrine of the preservation of the saints, since these have never been "saints" in the first place.

The Second Helvetic Confession

Our third confession is The Second Helvetic Confession of 1566. Like the previous two, this Swiss confession contains statements based on which we can clearly derive its position on the preservation of the saints:

XIV. The doctrine of repentance is joined with the Gospel. For so has the Lord said in the Gospel: "Repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in my name to all nations" (Luke 24:47)...By repentance we understand (1) the recovery of a right mind in sinful man awakened by the Word of the Gospel and the Holy Spirit, and received by true faith, by which the sinner immediately acknowledges his innate corruption and all his sins accused by the Word of God; and (2) grieves for them from his heart, and not only bewails and frankly confesses them before God with a feeling of shame, but also (3) with indignation abominates them; and (4) now zealously considers the amendment of his ways and constantly strives for innocence and virtue in which conscientiously to exercise himself all the rest of his life.

To say that "repentance" is "joined with the Gospel" means that the gospel is not preached unless repentance is also preached, and this also means that one who fails to truly repent has also failed to receive the gospel. Conversion involves repentance and "*true* faith," and "the recovery of a right mind." In other words, conversions involves more than mere profession of the faith, but a real inward belief and transformation.

Anyone has the physical ability to say that he believes the gospel, but unless there is true repentance, true faith, and true transformation, there is no true conversion, and the person is not a true believer. Therefore, when this person "falls away," he is not falling away from true faith, since he never had it in the first place; rather, he is only changing from one version of sinful existence to another.

But the same God who grants a believer true repentance and true faith, by granting continual repentance and persevering faith, also preserves him such that he "constantly strives for innocence and virtue...all the rest of his life."

XVI. But this faith is a pure gift of God which God alone of his grace gives to his elect according to his measure when, to whom and to the degree he wills....The same apostle calls faith efficacious and active through love (Gal. 5:6)....The same [faith] keeps us in the service we owe to God and our neighbor, strengthens our patience in adversity, fashions and makes a true confession, and in a word, brings forth good fruit of all kinds, and good works.

The preservation of the saints logically comes after regeneration and conversion, although these are all united in the eternal decree. Now, when it comes to conversion, the Reformed view is that faith is a gift that God sovereignly grants to his chosen ones. Then, chapter XVI says that this faith is not an impotent and lifeless faith, but an active and efficacious faith. It is living, powerful, and preserved by God's decree and power.

Therefore, once granted to the elect, this faith never dies, but it abides and "brings forth good fruit of all kinds." In other words, the believer perseveres because God preserves his living faith, so that even if it flickers at times, it is never allowed to completely extinguish.

The Canons of Dordt

When we come to The Canons of Dordt and The Westminster Confession, we find entire chapters dedicated to the preservation of the saints. This is not surprising, because whereas the previous three confessions were produced during the second half of the sixteenth century, these two were produced after the Remonstrance of 1610, that is, the controversy with the five articles of Arminianism.

The Canons of Dordt (1618-19) were written several years after the Remonstrance, but still during the early part of the seventeenth century; The Westminster Confession was completed several decades later, in 1647. Of course, Dordt was designed to counteract Arminianism, and after the Remonstrance, one would naturally expect a distinctively Reformed document like the Westminster Confession to affirm the preservation of the saints.

Dordt not only dedicates the Fifth Head of Doctrine to address the preservation of the saints, but it makes explicit and important assertions about it in several other places in the document. We will cite several examples here:

I. Article 7. In other words, he decided to grant them true faith in Christ, to justify them, to sanctify them, and finally, after powerfully preserving them in the fellowship of his Son, to glorify them.

This article points out at least two important points for the preservation of the saints. First, it states that sanctification, preservation, and glorification are not standalone doctrines, but they are the necessary products of divine election. This is because in election, God does not decide to merely convert those whom he has chosen, but to actually *save* them. This necessarily implies preservation and glorification.

Second, Dordt recognizes that the biblical emphasis is on God's sovereign grace and power, and on his immutable faithfulness to his own decree and promise, from conversion to glorification. The emphasis is never on man's decision and response, since these are also determined by God's will and power. Of course the chosen ones must believe to be saved, but it is God who "decided to grant them true faith in Christ." And of course they must persevere to the end, but it is God who decided to go on "powerfully preserving them in the fellowship of his Son."

I. Article 11. Just as God himself is most wise, unchangeable, all-knowing, and almighty, so the election made by him can neither be suspended nor altered, revoked, or annulled; neither can his chosen ones be cast off, nor their number reduced.

Although the article is still addressing divine election, to accurately present this biblical doctrine Dordt finds it necessary to indicate that the chosen ones consist of an immutable *number* – the decree for their salvation is precise, and cannot be changed in any way. Therefore, all those whom God has chosen will be converted, and persevere to the end. Dordt places the truth of this doctrine on the very nature of God. Because God is who he is, divine election must be individual and immutable, and all the chosen ones will indeed be converted, justified, sanctified, and glorified.

II. Article 8. For it was the entirely free plan and very gracious will and intention of God the Father that the enlivening and saving effectiveness of his Son's costly death should work itself out in all his chosen ones, in order that he might grant justifying faith to them only and thereby lead them without fail to salvation....that he should faithfully preserve them to the very end; and that he should finally present them to himself, a glorious people, without spot or wrinkle.

We have already mentioned that the effective particular atonement of Christ necessarily implies the preservation of the saints, since this is what Christ died and paid for – the complete and final salvation (not just the conversion) of all the chosen ones. And so, what the Son has set out to do, he shall surely accomplish, which is to bring his chosen ones "without fail to salvation."

The Fifth Head itself is too lengthy to reproduce here – it explains and affirms in detail the Reformed doctrine of the preservation of the saints, and then makes elaborate denials against the corresponding errors in Arminianism. We will examine only several of its articles:

V. Article 3. Because of these remnants of sin dwelling in them and also because of the temptations of the world and Satan, those who have been converted could not remain standing in this grace if left to their own resources. But God is faithful, mercifully strengthening them in the grace once conferred on them and powerfully preserving them in it to the end.

V. Article 6. For God, who is rich in mercy, according to his unchangeable purpose of election does not take his Holy Spirit from his own completely, even when they fall grievously. Neither does he let them fall down so far that they forfeit the grace of adoption and the state of justification, or commit the sin which leads to death (the sin against the Holy Spirit), and plunge themselves, entirely forsaken by him, into eternal ruin.

V. Article 7. For, in the first place, God preserves in those saints when they fall his imperishable seed from which they have been born again, lest it perish or be dislodged. Secondly, by his Word and Spirit he certainly and effectively renews them to repentance so that they have a heartfelt and godly sorrow for the sins they have committed; seek and obtain, through faith and with a contrite heart, forgiveness in the blood of the Mediator; experience again the grace of a reconciled God; through faith adore his mercies; and from then on more eagerly work out their own salvation with fear and trembling.

V. Article 8. So it is not by their own merits or strength but by God's undeserved mercy that they neither forfeit faith and grace totally nor remain in their downfalls to the end and are lost. With respect to themselves this not only easily could happen, but also undoubtedly would happen; but with respect to God it cannot possibly happen, since his plan cannot be changed, his promise cannot fail, the calling according to his purpose cannot be revoked, the merits of Christ as well as his interceding and preserving cannot be nullified, and the sealing of the Holy Spirit can neither be invalidated nor wiped out.

V. Article 14. And, just as it has pleased God to begin this work of grace in us by the proclamation of the gospel, so he preserves, continues, and completes his work by the hearing and reading of the gospel, by meditation on it, by its exhortation, threats, and promises, and also by the use of the sacraments.

Article 7 reminds us that spiritual regeneration is permanent, because in it God imparts to us indestructible spiritual life. Dordt repeats this point from a negative perspective in V. Rejection of errors 8. To say that regeneration is reversible is to misconstrue the very biblical definition of regeneration, distorting one's view of the whole of soteriology.

However, even some Reformed believers are confused about this point. They correctly affirm that the saints persevere because they have received indestructible spiritual life at regeneration, but they fail to consider why this life perpetuates. Because of this neglect, some almost speak as if they affirm the teaching that although salvation is obtained by grace, it is nevertheless maintained by works, that to persevere in salvation means to maintain it by good behavior.

Dordt corrects this misunderstanding by making an important clarification. Believers are not enabled to persevere by themselves or by their own will and power after conversion. In fact, "those who have been converted could not remain standing in this grace if left to their own resources." Rather, they persevere because God is "mercifully strengthening them" and "powerfully preserving them." In other words, the believer's new spiritual life is indestructible because God makes it indestructible.

This means that if a believer does not persevere, it would not be because of him, in the sense that if the believer is going to depend on his own will and power, his failure is certain anyway. That is, if perseverance depends on the believers, then no one would persevere. Rather, perseverance depends on God's preservation, and the only way that a believer would fail to persevere is if God does not preserve him, and the only way that God would not preserve a chosen one in faith and holiness is if he changes his eternal decree, which is impossible by definition.

Article 8 mentions Christ's intercession for the elect, which is part of his ministry as Mediator. Since Christ is always faithful to carry out his work as intercessor, and since God always hear him, this intercession "cannot be nullified." Then, this article also refers to the sealing of the Spirit. We will say a little more about this in a later section on the scriptural support for the preservation of the saints. For now, we will just say that the sealing of the Spirit guarantees the salvation of the elect.

As with the other Reformed confessions, Dordt is careful to note that this doctrine of the preservation of the saints does not deny that a believer continues to face temptations and difficulties in this life. In fact, it acknowledges that some believers may even "fall grievously"; however, "according to his unchangeable purpose of election," God will never allow his elect to "fall down so far that they forfeit the grace of adoption and the state of justification."

Finally, Article 14 brings up something that we have not yet really discussed, namely, some of the means by which God uses to preserve his people. Just as God summons the elect to conversion through the preaching of the gospel, "he preserves, continues, and completes his work by the hearing and reading of the gospel, by meditation on it, by its exhortation, threats, and promises, and also by the use of the sacraments." The people of God, therefore, would be wise to make deliberate and frequent use of these means of grace.

The Westminster Confession

The Westminster Confession devotes chapter XVII to the perseverance of the saints. Compared to the previous confessions, there is nothing entirely new here, but this chapter clearly and concisely summarizes many of the important points that we have discussed above. It reads as follows:

1. They, whom God hath accepted in His Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.

2. This perseverance of the saints depends not upon their own free will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father; upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ, the abiding of the Spirit, and of the seed of God within them, and the nature of the covenant of grace: from all which ariseth also the certainty and infallibility thereof.

3. Nevertheless, they may, through the temptations of Satan and of the world, the prevalency of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of the means of their preservation, fall into grievous sins; and, for a time, continue therein: whereby they incur God's displeasure, and grieve His Holy Spirit, come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts, have their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded; hurt and scandalize others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves.

Having already discussed the other confessions, I trust that no elaborate explanation is necessary. Section 1 affirms the Reformed position on the perseverance of the saints. Section 2 summarizes some of the theological reasons for such an affirmation – God's immutable decree in election, Christ's effective particular atonement and priestly intercessory ministry, the Spirit's indwelling and influence, the indestructible seed of spiritual life imparted in regeneration, and the covenant of grace. Section 3 serves to prevent the typical false accusations and misunderstandings by acknowledging that even the truly converted may at times fall into serious sins, but they are nevertheless preserved from total and final apostasy by the will and power of God.

The Larger Catechism

The Larger Catechism, of course, entirely agrees with the Westminster Confession on the preservation of the saints both in its language and substance:

Q. 79. May not true believers, by reason of their imperfections, and the many temptations and sins they are overtaken with, fall away from the state of grace?

A. True believers, by reason of the unchangeable love of God, and his decree and covenant to give them perseverance, their inseparable union with Christ, his continual intercession for them, and the Spirit and seed of God abiding in them, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation.

The Catechism here stresses the perseverance of "*true* believers." In other words, some are false believers, and they will not persevere in the faith, having never even started in the faith in the first place. On the other hand, true believers are those whom God has truly converted, and these "can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but are kept *by the power of God through faith* unto salvation."

The expression "by the power of God through faith" is excellent. It affirms that it is the power of God that preserves the saints, and that this is done by sustaining their faith, first granted to them at conversion.

The Shorter Catechism

The Shorter Catechism is also consistent with the rest of the Westminster Standards:

Q. 36. What are the benefits which in this life do accompany or flow from justification, adoption, and sanctification?

A. The benefits which in this life do accompany or flow from justification, adoption, and sanctification are: assurance of God's love, peace of conscience, joy in the Holy Ghost, increase of grace, and perseverance therein to the end.

Here the Catechism emphasizes the fact that preservation is one of the benefits following from justification, adoption, and sanctification. In other words, preservation is not just a mere possibility produced by justification, adoption, and sanctification, but is rather a necessary consequence, inherently included in them.

SCRIPTURAL EXPOSITIONS

Biblical soteriology, of course, does not start with the preservation of the saints, but with divine election. A truly biblical soteriology is in turn founded on a biblical view of theology proper, or the nature of God. Scripture declares that God is one who works out all things according to the counsel of his own will, and according to all his good pleasure. This becomes the controlling factor in a truly biblical soteriology, and any theological conception that contradicts this must be immediately judged as false.

As the Reformed confessions illustrate, the preservation of the saints is not a standalone doctrine, but it follows from other biblical doctrines concerning salvation. If I tell you that I have determined to reach the finish line in a race, it is assumed that I will transverse the distance between the starting line and the finish line, and that I will also jump over any hurdles in the way. The preservation of the saints is thus not a standalone doctrine, and to deny it would be to contradict not only this particular doctrine, but the whole pattern of biblical soteriology.

Thus even before we examine the biblical passages that directly support the preservation of the saints, we are already assured that it is indeed a biblical teaching, because it is the necessary implication of other biblical doctrines. The whole pattern of biblical soteriology demands it.

That said, there are numerous biblical passages that are directly relevant to the doctrine. We will list a number of them in this section. We cannot take time to examine each passage; however, we will place many of them under well-defined sections. This will make the

meaning and relevance of each passage more easily discerned. Also, for most passages, we will highlight the relevant words to aid in understanding.

Election

The biblical doctrine of election teaches that God has chosen a definite and immutable number of individuals for salvation. The other side of election is reprobation, in which God has chosen a definite and immutable number of individuals (all those not chosen for salvation) for damnation.

Just as reprobation is an eternal decree predetermining the final destiny of the reprobates, and not just their spiritual condition for an undecided duration, so election is an eternal decree predetermining the final destiny of the elect. It is not a decree to simply convert certain individuals, but to actually, completely, and finally save them. Therefore, if an elected individual could be truly converted and then fall away, it would mean that the eternal decree of election has failed, which is impossible.

Romans 8:28-39. And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; *those he justified, he also glorified.*

What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, *nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God* that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Ephesians 1:11-12. In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.

Redemption

Christ's atoning work is an actual and complete purchase of all the individuals for which the atonement is designed to redeem. The atonement does not only make salvation a mere possibility for the elect, but it ensures their actual salvation. This means that the atonement *guarantees* the complete and final salvation of all those for whom Christ died. Since not all will be saved, we know that Christ did not die for everyone, but only for those whom God has chosen in eternity; therefore, the reprobates are justly condemned. However, there is no condemnation for the elect, for whom Christ died. The implication for the preservation of the saints is obvious.

Christ's ministry as Mediator does not end with his death and resurrection, but he lives forever to be our High Priest, interceding for us with the Father and preserving our faith in him. Since Christ will never fail in his ministry as Mediator, true believers will never truly and finally fail in their faith.

John 6:35-40. Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe. All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me *I will never drive away*. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that *I shall lose none of all that he has given me*, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."

John 10:25-30. Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; *no one can snatch them out of my hand*. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; *no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand*. I and the Father are one."

Hebrews 7:25-28. Therefore he is able to *save completely* those who come to God through him, because he *always lives to intercede for them*. Such a high priest meets our need – one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins *once for all* when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever.

Hebrews 10:10, 14. And by that will, *we have been made holy* through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ *once for all....because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.*

Hebrews 12:2. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the *author* and *perfecter* of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Regeneration

In regeneration, God imparts to the elect indestructible spiritual life, transforming the very nature and dispositions of their hearts. Since this spiritual life is indestructible, it means that regeneration is irreversible. Therefore, once regenerated, a person cannot then truly and finally turn away from God or denounce Christ. This means that all those who are regenerated will also persevere. Any doctrine that denies this contradicts the very meaning of regeneration.

1 Peter 1:23. For you have been born again, *not of perishable seed, but of imperishable*, through the living and enduring word of God.

1 John 2:18-19. Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. *For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.*

1 John 3:6-9. No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him. Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because *God's seed remains in him*; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God.

2 John 1:9. Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.

Certification

As with God's election and Christ's atonement, the biblical teaching on the Spirit's sealing also implies the preservation of the saints. Scripture declares that the Holy Spirit has been placed in the believer at conversion as a seal. This seal is not mere decoration, but a guarantee that the believer will reach his designated destiny, which is glorification in Christ.

2 Corinthians 1:21-22. Now it is *God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ*. He anointed us, set his *seal of ownership* on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, *guaranteeing* what is to come.

Ephesians 1:13-14. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit *guaranteeing* our inheritance *until the redemption* of those who are God's possession – to the praise of his glory.

Ephesians 4:30. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were *sealed for the day of redemption*.

Sanctification

In God's sovereign and eternal decree, he has not foreordained only the conversion of his elect, but also his justification, adoption, and sanctification. Just as the elect have been foreordained to conversion and thus given faith in Christ, so they have been foreordained to sanctification and thus made holy by the Spirit. In fact, God has predetermined the very good works that the elect shall walk in, and he is the cause and the power behind both *the will* and *the act* of these good works done by the elect. Therefore, the elect have been just as certainly foreordained to sanctification as they have been chosen for conversion. This means that true and final apostasy is impossible.

Jeremiah 32:40. I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them, and *I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me*.

Philippians 1:4-6. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that *he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion* until the day of Christ Jesus.

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24. *May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless* at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and *he will do it*.

2 Thessalonians 2:13-17. But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because *from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work* of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter. May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who

loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and *strengthen you in every good deed and word.*

Hebrews 13:20-21. May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, *equip you with everything good for doing his will,* and may he *work in us what is pleasing to him,* through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

1 Peter 1:3-5. Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who *through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation* that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

Other Passages

The following lists some of the other biblical passages related to the preservation of the saints. Some of them are more directly relevant to the topic than others, but all of them support the doctrine.

Psalm 17:8-9. Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings from the wicked who assail me, from my mortal enemies who surround me.

Psalm 37:23-24, 28-29. If the LORD delights in a man's way, he makes his steps firm; though he stumble, he will not fall, for the LORD upholds him with his hand....For the LORD loves the just and will not forsake his faithful ones. They will be protected forever, but the offspring of the wicked will be cut off; the righteous will inherit the land and dwell in it forever.

Psalm 73:1-2, 23. Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold....Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand.

Psalm 121:3, 7-8. He will not let your foot slip – he who watches over you will not slumber....The LORD will keep you from all harm – he will watch over your life; the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.

2 Samuel 23:5-7. Is not my house right with God? Has he not made with me an everlasting covenant, arranged and secured in every part? Will he not bring to fruition my salvation and grant me my every desire? But evil men are all to be cast aside like thorns, which are not gathered with the

hand. Whoever touches thorns uses a tool of iron or the shaft of a spear; they are burned up where they lie.

Isaiah 54:10. Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed," says the LORD, who has compassion on you.

Jeremiah 31:3. The LORD appeared to us in the past, saying: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness."

Matthew 18:12-14. What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.

Matthew 24:24. For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect – if that were possible.

Luke 22:31-32. Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But *I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail.* And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.

John 14:16-17. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor *to be with you forever* – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.

John 17:9-12, 20. *I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours.* All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name – the name you gave me – so that they may be one as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. *None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled....My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message.*

Romans 5:9-10. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the

death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

Romans 11:7. What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened.

Romans 14:4. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

Romans 16:25-27. Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him – to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.

1 Corinthians 1:8-9. He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.

1 Corinthians 3:14-15. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

1 Corinthians 10:13. No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

2 Corinthians 9:8. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

Ephesians 5:25-27. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

2 Thessalonians 3:2-5. And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not everyone has faith. But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one. We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command. May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance.

2 Timothy 1:12. That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day.

2 Timothy 2:18-19. ...who have wandered away from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some. Nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness."

2 Timothy 4:18. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Hebrews 9:12-15. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance – now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.

1 Peter 1:8-9. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

2 Peter 1:10-11. Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

1 John 2:24-25. See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he promised us – even eternal life.

1 John 2:27. As for you, *the anointing you received from him remains in you*, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit – just as it has taught you, remain in him.

1 John 5:3-4. This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.

1 John 5:11-13. And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.

1 John 5:20. We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true – even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.

Jude 1, 24-25. Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James, To those who have been called, who are loved by God the Father and kept by Jesus Christ....To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.

ARMINIAN OBJECTIONS

There are several kinds of objections against the biblical doctrine of the preservation of the saints. Here we will summarize the theological, biblical, and ethical objections. They do not come from only Arminians, but also Catholics. Although all of the following objections have already been answered in some way in the previous sections, here we will briefly but directly address them to remove remaining misunderstandings about the doctrine.

Theological

One theological or philosophical objection against the preservation of the saints is that it undermines human free will. The doctrine implies that a believer is never "free" to decide to undo his own faith and salvation.

To this, we respond that the objection is right in that the believer is never free to decide to undo his own faith and salvation. But it is a pointless objection unless man indeed possesses such freedom from God's control. In the study of biblical soteriology, we establish from the beginning to end that there is no such thing as human free will, in the sense that man is never free from God, and that God always possesses and exercises complete control over the will of man.

This does not mean that man's will is never involved. Conversion, sanctification, and other aspects of man's salvation often involve his will. The question is whether his will is ever free from God's constant, absolute, and precise control. We contend that it is biblically false and metaphysically impossible for man to be free from God in any sense. The objection from free will thus cannot really apply to the Christianity of Scripture, since it rejects free will, and in every aspect of salvation, including sanctification and preservation.

Of course, objections related to human "free will" come up not only when we are discussing the preservation of the saints, but also when we are discussing any other item in biblical soteriology. However, since free will is unbiblical and false, this means that those who affirm free will is mistaken on every item in soteriology, and this is indeed what we find with the Arminians and Catholics.

Moreover, since God has permanently transformed the nature and the disposition of the elect in regeneration, a true believer will never want to undo his faith and salvation.

Biblical

There are a number of biblical passages that command Christians to pursue righteousness and shun wickedness. Some of these passages are so strong in expression and contain warnings so ominous that some people misinterpret them as saying that it is possible for a true believer to lose his salvation. For example, Hebrews 6:4-6 says the following:

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

First, whatever the passage means, it does not say that the elect will in fact renounce his faith. Let us assume that the passage is indeed saying that if one falls away from faith after reaching a certain stage of spiritual development he would indeed lose his salvation. This does not challenge the doctrine of preservation – in fact, we may heartily agree with it. If the elect sincerely and permanently renounces Christ, then he loses his salvation. However, we have already read a number of verses saying that this will never happen, that the true believer will never sincerely and permanently renounce Christ, and the above passage says nothing to contradict this. John says that those who depart from the faith have never been truly with the faith.

Second, several verses later, the writer explicitly states that what this passage describes will not happen to his readers: "Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case – things that accompany salvation" (Hebrews 6:9). To paraphrase, he is saying, "Although we are talking this way, I am sure that when it comes to salvation, this will not happen to you."

Third, we must remember that God uses various means by which he accomplishes his ends. For example, although he has unchangeably determined the identities of those who would be saved, he does not save these people without means. Rather, he saves the elect by means of the preaching of the gospel, and by means of the faith in Christ that he places within them. God uses various means to accomplish his ends, and he chooses and controls both the means and the ends.

Accordingly, just because we are told that the elect will persevere in faith does not mean that God does not warn them against apostasy. In fact, these scriptural warnings about the consequences of renouncing the Christian faith is one of the means by which God will prevent his elect from apostasy. The reprobates will ignore these warnings, but the elect will heed them (John 10:27), and so they will continue to work on their sanctification "with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12). Concerning the words of God, Psalm 19:11 says, "By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward."

Ethical

One of the most common objections to the preservation of the saints states that if it is true that the believer cannot lose his salvation, then this constitutes an implicit license to sin. It seems the Christian may sin all he wants, and still remains secure in Christ. However, the true Christian does not wish to live in sin, although he may occasionally stumble. The true believer detests sin and loves righteousness. One who sins without restraint is not a Christian at all.

The doctrine of preservation does not say that anyone who makes a profession of faith in Christ is then saved and will never be lost, since his profession may be false. Rather, the doctrine teaches that true Christians will never be lost. They will never permanently turn from Christ, although some of them may even fall deeply into sin for a time.

A true Christian is one who has given true assent to the gospel, and whose "sincere faith" (1 Timothy 1:5) becomes evident through a lasting transformation of thoughts, speech, and behavior in conformity to the demands of Scripture. John says that one who is regenerated "cannot go on sinning" (1 John 3:9). On the other hand, a person who produces a profession of Christ out of a false assent to the gospel may last "only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away" (Matthew 13:21).

CONCLUSION

The doctrine of the preservation of the saints teaches us that true believers will never be lost; they will never truly and finally abandon the faith. This is because God has sovereignly foreordained their complete salvation before the foundation of the world, and because he powerfully preserves them after their conversion. After regeneration, the Spirit of God continues to work within them, powerfully causing them to strive for true knowledge and holiness.

Nevertheless, it does not mean that the elect remain perfectly sinless and obedient throughout their spiritual walk; rather, at times they may even fall into serious sins. However, the immutable eternal decree of God, the atonement and intercession of Christ, and the operation of the Spirit in the believers ensure that they will never finally fall away.

As for the reprobates, although some of them may profess the faith for a while, their profession is false and hypocritical. God has never foreordained them to salvation, but have foreordained them for destruction. Rather than sending his Spirit to powerfully work in their hearts, he hardens their hearts by a spirit of disobedience. Of course, this means that there is no spiritual life or power in them to cause them to persevere in true faith, so that they easily fall away even from the false profession by which they claim to embrace the gospel.

The biblical doctrine provides the people of God a strong and infallible source of comfort and assurance. It warns them against false profession and self-deception, and it allows them to biblically and realistically approach their own remaining sinfulness and imperfections.

This leads us to the related topic of assurance. The biblical doctrine of the preservation of the saints provides a legitimate foundation for the assurance of salvation. It is an assurance based on truth, fortifying their minds against oppressive doubts concerning their relationship to Christ.

17. Freewill Offerings and Human Freedom

As an attempt to refute the fact that the Bible never says that man has free will, there are people who point out that the Bible mentions "freewill offerings" in a number of places, and on this basis they assert that the Bible therefore teaches free will or that man has free will. In the NIV, see: Exodus 35:29, 36:3; Leviticus 7:16, 22:18, 21, 23, 23:38; Numbers 15:3, 29:39; Deuteronomy 12:6, 17, 16:10; 2 Chronicles 31:14; Ezra 1:4, 6, 2:68, 3:5, 7:16, 8:28; Psalms 54:6; Ezekiel 46:12; Amos 4:5. The term is not always rendered "freewill offerings," but in places where the NIV and NASB offer such a translation, the KJV sometimes says "free offerings," "voluntary offerings," and "willing offerings."

This is one of the strangest objections against the denial of free will. It seizes upon the English term that is common between the verses cited and the topic of divine sovereignty and human freedom. However, there is no relevance in substance between these verses and the topic.

Freedom is relative – you are free *from something*. We say that man has no free will because in discussing divine sovereignty and human freedom, we are discussing the metaphysical relationship between God and man. It has to do with the manner and extent that God exercises control over man's thoughts and actions. Thus in such a context, when we ask whether man has free will, we are asking whether man is free *from God* or *from God's control* in any sense. Since the biblical teaching is that God exercises constant and comprehensive control over all of man's thoughts and actions, the conclusion is that man has no free will. He has zero freedom relative to God.

Since God is the absolute reference point, to say that man has no freedom relative to God is also to say that man has no freedom in the absolute sense. Whether man possesses freedom in a relative sense, or freedom relative to persons and things other than God (people, objects, and forces, etc.), is another question, and one that does not have to be addressed in the discussion about divine sovereignty and human freedom. However, for the sake of completeness, we can affirm that man has some freedom relative to other creatures. No human being can control me in a way or to an extent like God's absolute control over my thoughts and actions. This does not mean that I have "free will," since we are talking about our relationship with God, and not with other creatures.

Popular Calvinism confuses the issue. It affirms relative freedom from other creatures and from external forces, and then it connects this with our absolute responsibility toward God. The truth is that if responsibility presupposes freedom, then our absolute responsibility toward God must presuppose an absolute freedom from God. But then, if our freedom from God is absolute, why are we responsible to him at all? In fact, responsibility does not presuppose freedom, but it presupposes the opposite of freedom. We are responsible to God because we are not free from God. This confusion is also one of the reasons some Calvinists fail to discern the sophistry in the objection under consideration. They fail to see

that freedom is a relative term, that relative to God we are not free, and that the verses cited by our opponents refer to a freedom that is not relative to God, but to something else.

The "freewill offering" is "free" because the Law does not require it as it does the other regular and occasional offerings, so the freedom is relative to the Law, and the freedom related to this offering exists only in this sense. The people are "free" to give or not give the offering from a *legal* or *ceremonial* perspective. These verses do not address the *metaphysical* perspective, so that they can neither establish nor refute human freedom in the metaphysical sense. When referring to "free will" in the context of divine sovereignty and human freedom, we are talking about whether we are free *from God* – and this is about metaphysics. We are talking about whether God has complete control over man's thoughts, actions, and circumstances – he does, and therefore man has no free will, no freedom relative to God. In one instance, we are talking about man's relationship (of moral obligation) with the Law, in the other, about man's relationship (of cause and effect) with God. Only the English term happens to be the same, and not even all the time in the English versions, but they are two different subjects of discussion.

There are passages that refer to this relative freedom but do not use the term. Here is one example: "Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God" (Acts 5:4, KJV). When Peter says that the property was "thine own," and that the money was "in thine own power," he is referring to property ownership relative to *Peter himself* and *the other Christians* – Ananias did not have to sell the property or give the money *to them*. This relative ownership or freedom has nothing to do with divine determinism – they are two different subjects. Peter is not saying that Ananias had ownership of the property or money relative *to God*, but he is saying that he had the right or the freedom to withhold the property or the money from *other people*. And even when he refers to this freedom from other people, he means a freedom from a legal or moral perspective, not a metaphysical one. Peter is not saying that Ananias could have kept the property or money *from God* in a metaphysical sense! Metaphysics is what we are talking about when we discuss divine determinism.

Another verse sometimes cited is Philemon 1:14. In the NASB, it reads, "...but without your consent I did not want to do anything, that your goodness should not be as it were by compulsion, but of your own free will." Paul says that Philemon has free will! This verse is even more obviously irrelevant than the others, since those involved are explicitly mentioned. Paul says that "I" (Paul) did not want to do anything without "your" (Philemon's) consent. He did not want Philemon to act out of "compulsion," but this compulsion is relative to Paul, and thus also the so-called "free will," so that the freedom is relative to Paul. The verse refers to the *social* relationship between two people, *Paul* and *Philemon*, but it says nothing about the *metaphysical* relationship between *God* and *Philemon*.

Popular Calvinism fails to make a clean break with the unbiblical thinking of our opponents when it comes to human freedom. For this reason, it is unable to clearly demonstrate the difference and to avoid confusion. It teaches that divine sovereignty and human freedom

are "compatible" because man always acts according to his strongest desire, that he is never forced, by God or anyone else, to think or act against his will. However, if as Scripture teaches, God's control over man is so immediate and exhaustive such that he directly controls man's will and desire, then man is not free from God even though his will is never forced against his desire. He is never forced not because he is free, but because he is so *not free*, so completely controlled by God, that even his will and desire are controlled by God, so that there is nothing left for God to force. Thus God is sovereign and man is not free. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

18. More Than a Potter

"If God determines all that we do so that we are not free from him in any sense, then we are nothing more than robots and puppets."

This is one of the most common objections against the teaching of divine sovereignty. Popular Calvinism answers it by attributing to man some kind of freedom or power of "self-determination," alleging that this is somehow "compatible" with God's control over all things. Some Calvinists (e.g. A. A. Hodge, R. L. Dabney, etc.) answer the objection in a way that sounds similar to open theism. They say that since God knows the dispositions of his creatures, he is able to "control" their decisions and actions by manipulating their circumstances, and thus "inducing" them to "freely" think and act in ways that are in accordance to God's plans.

Some of these Calvinists also realize that this explanation of God's "control" over the decisions and actions of man is logically incompatible with their alleged belief in God's sovereignty. So after some initial explanations and evasions, they finally have to call it a "paradox" and a "mystery." It will save everyone a lot of time if they would admit the contradiction at the beginning, and call it a "paradox" and a "mystery" from the start. This way everyone can go home early.

Since I reject compatibilism and human freedom in any sense relative to God, it follows that I offer a different answer. I affirm that God is sovereign and man is not free. This position provides the only biblical and rational answer, which also happens to be the simplest and boldest response against the challenge. Since I have explained and defended the biblical teaching of divine sovereignty elsewhere,⁵⁵ I will not repeat all of that. What follows will be an application of what I have written about divine sovereignty to the above objection.

The objection is incomplete. It fails to specify what it is about robots and puppets that would make them relevant. Why would we be like robots and puppets if God determines our thoughts and actions? What would be the similarities? Then, the statement fails to become an actual objection by neglecting to say why it would be a problem for us to be robots and puppets. Would it mean that the Christian faith is false, or would it contradict the Christian faith, if we are robots and puppets? The objection does not explain. Would it undermine moral responsibility if we are robots and puppets? The objection fails to even mention this.

Our opponents try to get away with making lazy and half-baked objections. They assume that they understand the issues and that their objections are unanswerable, but they are not

⁵⁵ See Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology, Ultimate Questions, and Commentary on Ephesians*.

as intelligent as they think. This objection has been neutralized even before we begin to answer it. Nevertheless, we will address the topic anyway.

First, the fact that God controls our thoughts and actions does not make us robots and puppets, because even when controlled by God, humans are very different. Humans have minds – they reason and decide. In fact, since our identities are preserved when we are disembodied, humans *are* minds that live in bodies.⁵⁶ Robots and puppets are not minds, but are entirely physical objects. They have no thoughts to be controlled, but only physical parts and properties to be manipulated.

Some of our thoughts are occasions for physiological events. There is no inherent and necessary relationship between mind and body, but it is God who directly controls both, usually but not always correlating the two. This is different from robots and puppets, since they have no thoughts at all. Their physical movements are not occasioned by their thoughts, since they have none, but by the thoughts of those who use their hands and instruments to control them. And it is God who directly controls them all – the human mind, the relationship between the human mind and the human body, the human body itself, and the relationship between the human body and the instruments, the robots and the puppets. On the occasion that God directly acts on one (for example, when he causes the human mind to decide to move a finger), he also directly acts on the other (he causes the finger to move).

The objection does not explain why it is a problem for humans to be robots and puppets, and so it fails before we answer it. We point out the differences between humans and robots and puppets not because the objection compels us, but to show that the objection fails even if we pretend that it makes sense. It is obvious that even if humans are controlled by God, they are unlike robots and puppets.

Second, although sometimes unstated, the objection falsely makes human freedom the basis of moral responsibility. The assumptions are: (1) It is necessary to affirm that humans are morally responsible; (2) Moral responsibility presupposes human freedom; and (3) Robots and puppets are not free. The opponent correctly reasons that if God is absolutely sovereign, then humans are not free. Then, he likens these humans, who are not free, to robots and puppets, which are also not free. This in turn means that if God controls all things, then humans are not morally responsible, but since it is necessary to affirm that humans are morally responsible, it means that we cannot affirm that God controls all things.

We will first remove a distraction, and that is the unnecessary analogy of humans to robots and puppets. This step could be skipped and the objection would be unaltered; in fact, it would be clearer without the analogy. It would be simpler to say, "If God controls all things, then humans are not free. But since moral responsibility presupposes human freedom, this means that if God controls all things, then humans are not morally responsible. However, since it is necessary to affirm that humans are morally responsible, we must deny that God controls all things."

⁵⁶ Peter refers to the body as a "tent" that could be "put aside" (2 Peter 1:13–14; also 2 Corinthians 5:4).

The conclusion would be correct if all the assumptions are true. However, not all the assumptions are correct, and so the objection crumbles. The fatal error is the assumption that moral responsibility presupposes human freedom. This premise is explicitly contradicted by Scripture, and it has never been justified in the history of theology and philosophy. It is so ingrained in most thinkers that when they even bother to mention it or consider ways to justify it, they would often say that it is known by intuition and move on.

However, the assumption is false. By definition, "responsibility" refers to accountability. For one to be morally *responsible* means that he is morally *accountable* to some person or standard. Whether this person is free is irrelevant. The only relevant issue is whether the one who has authority over this person has decided to hold him accountable. Since God rules over all of humanity, and he has decided to judge every man, this means that every person is morally responsible, regardless of whether he is free. Human freedom has no logical place to enter the discussion.

God could just as easily hold robots and puppets responsible, not in the sense that they could understand their actions, but in the sense that God could reward or punish them if he pleases. Jesus cursed a fig tree to death for failing to bear fruit. The tree was not free, or even conscious, but it was punished, and Jesus was justified in doing it. Whatever symbolic meaning the event conveyed,⁵⁷ the tree failed to bear fruit, and Jesus cursed it for this reason. Likewise, if God pleases, he could destroy a robot for malfunctioning, and since he is the sole standard of morality, he would be righteous by definition in doing this. He does not need to request our permission or to satisfy our silly assumptions about justice. He is justice.

Humans are morally responsible for precisely the opposite reason assumed by the objection – we are responsible because God is sovereign and we are not free.

Third, contrary to its intent, the objection uses an analogy that ascribes *too much* freedom to humans relative to God. Our opponent expects the Christian to explain how humans are more free than robots and puppets, or how humans have genuine freedom while robots and puppets do not. Those who follow popular Calvinism will try to affirm both divine sovereignty and human freedom at the same time. This plays right into the opponent's expectation – it shows that popular Calvinism is incoherent and paradoxical, and that it is affirmed by force, as even some Calvinist and Reformed theologians admit.⁵⁸

However, if we would cast aside the usual false assumptions, we would confront the objection by claiming the opposite. The objection cannot apply to the biblical doctrine of divine sovereignty, not because its analogy denies freedom to man, but because it concedes far too little control to God. God has infinitely more control over us than we have over robots and puppets.

⁵⁷ See Vincent Cheung, "Faith to Move Mountains."

⁵⁸ See Vincent Cheung, "Forced to Believe." A. A. Hodge writes, "Although the absolute origination of any new existence out of nothing is to us confessedly inconceivable, it is not one whit more so than the relation of the infinite foreknowledge, or foreordination, or providential control of God to the free agency of men, nor than many other truths which we are all *forced to believe*."

When it comes to robots and puppets, we can only rearrange and combine preexisting materials to form objects whose designs and functions are limited by its materials, by our intelligence and creativity, and by our ability to maintain and manipulate them.

This is not so with God. Whether we are speaking of robots, puppets, or humans, God is the one who creates, sustains, and controls the very materials from which they are made. He is the one who conceived their designs and functions, and he is not limited to these, but he can change them at any time if he wishes. He can create out of nothing (Genesis 1:1), change water into wine (John 2:9), turn stones into humans (Matthew 3:9), and humans into salt (Genesis 19:26). He could cause any object to function in ways that is apparently beyond their original design, such as to cause a donkey to speak (Numbers 22:28, 30; 2 Peter 2:16), and stones to cry out and praise him (Luke 19:40).

It is an abominable insult to God's majesty and power to suggest that he has no more control over us than we do over robots and puppets, or that we have more freedom relative to him than robots and puppets have relative to us.⁵⁹ Of course humans are greater than robots and puppets, but God is far greater than humans.

This brings us to a related objection against divine sovereignty. However, this time the objection is not based on an extra-biblical analogy, but it is a direct attack against Scripture.

¹⁸Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden. ¹⁹One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" ²⁰But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" ²¹Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? (Romans 9:18-21)

Paul refers to an objection against God's total and direct control of human hearts, including his power to directly cause faith and unbelief in them. The objection assumes that if humans cannot resist God's control, then they should not be blamed. Like many non-Christians, Arminians, and Calvinists, it adopts the unbiblical assumption that responsibility presupposes freedom. We have refuted this premise.

This other objection that I have in mind, related to the one about robots and puppets, attacks the analogy in verse 21. It has been stated by some liberal theologians who reject the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, and also by some professing Christians. They identify with the objection against divine sovereignty in verse 19, and they consider Paul's response in verse 21 fallacious. Paul writes, "Does not the potter have the right to make out

⁵⁹ As the following discussion of Romans 9 implies, it is fine to use an analogy to illustrate God's control over his creation in a relative sense, but no analogy can absolutely represent God's control over his creation. The error is not in using an analogy to illustrate God's control, but it is in suggesting that the analogy fully represents God's power.

of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?"⁶⁰ They answer, "But surely we are more than clay and pottery!"

They assert that Paul's response fails because his analogy is false. He likens humans to clay and pottery, but humans are more than clay and pottery, and therefore the analogy cannot explain how humans are held accountable under a sovereign God, a God who can directly act on the mind to cause both good and evil. The challenge is directed at Scripture itself, and not only a certain theological tradition. We offer the following points in reply.

First, the attack against verse 21 misses Paul's point. He does not claim that humans are exactly like clay and pottery in every way, but he is reminding his readers of the relationship between the creature and the Creator. In verse 20, he says that *the creature* has no right to "talk back," and in verse 21, he says that *the Creator* has every right to make whatever he wishes out of the creature. The point does not depend on whether humans are exactly like clay and pottery, but on whether God is the Creator and whether humans are the creatures. Since God is indeed the Creator and humans are indeed the creatures, Paul's point in verse 18 stands.

Second, the objection falsely assumes that responsibility presupposes freedom, and although Paul does not directly expose it, he achieves the same effect by answering the objection from the perspective of divine rights versus human rights. The objection says, "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" Paul answers, "God has the right to do whatever he wants with you, or to make anything out of you, and then still hold you accountable. But you have no right to talk back." This refutes popular Calvinism, which says, "God has the right to show mercy to whomever he chooses, but he merely passes by the reprobates, who have damned themselves." Paul's answer is that the creature has no right to talk back, but that God has the right to make some into objects of mercy and to make others into the objects of wrath. He does not pass by anyone.

Third, the objection has forgotten about God. Outside of the analogy, it is true that humans are more than clay and pottery, but then God is more than a potter!

An analogy is an analogy, and a successful one only needs to make its point. Scripture is perfect, and Paul's analogy is perfect for its purpose. It illustrates that the divine potter has the right to fashion the human clay into any type of vessel and for any purpose he chooses, and the creature has no right to protest against the Creator.

But an analogy remains an analogy – it is not supposed to represent every aspect of the objects that it illustrates. By pointing this out, the objection seeks to protect human

⁶⁰ Contrary to popular Calvinism, Paul does not say, "God makes the noble vessels out of the common vessels," or "God *makes* the noble vessels, and *allows* the common vessels to make themselves," or "God *makes* some of the clay into noble vessels, and *passes by* the rest preexisting common vessels." No, Paul says, "God *makes* the noble vessels *and* the common vessels out of *the same* lump of clay." This offers definite support to active and unconditional reprobation, as well as supralapsarianism. It does not help to regard the "clay" as already sinful, since Paul says that God *makes* the common vessels out of it. He does not use passive terms like "permit" or "pass by." Reprobates do not make themselves. It is God who makes them, and he makes them as reprobates.

freedom. However, we cannot relax the analogy for one object without doing the same for the other objects in the same analogy; otherwise, this would distort the relationship of these objects. So if man breaks away from the analogy to reveal his superiority over clay and pottery, then God also breaks away from the analogy to reveal his infinite majesty and power.

Contrary to the opponent's expectation, once we relax the analogy, the situation becomes even worse for him. Rather than preserving human freedom, the full sovereignty of God is exposed, and all the limitations imposed upon the "potter" are now lifted. For the same reason mentioned when we discussed robots and puppets, God has much more control over us than a human potter has over clay and pottery. By breaking the analogy, the objection moves to reclaim freedom for man, but instead it destroys all traces of human freedom and fully uncovers God's sovereignty, a creating and ruling power infinitely greater than any human potter can exercise over lumps of clay.

As for moral responsibility, we have already addressed the topic. The truth is that moral responsibility presupposes divine sovereignty and judgment, not human freedom, and the more sovereign God is, the more sure the judgment will be. The more control God has over all things, the more moral responsibility is established. Since divine sovereignty is absolute, divine judgment is therefore certain – because God is sovereign, there will be a judgment.

19. Jeremiah 32:35

Someone wrote: "If you're so convinced that the most Holy God is ultimately behind all sin and evil, explain why He unequivocally states the exact opposite concerning idolatry in Jeremiah 32:35: '*And they built the high places of Baal which are in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, to cause their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire to Molech, which I did not command them, nor did it come into My mind that they should do this abomination, to cause Judah to sin.*' God is plainly stating that this is not His doing. If it did not enter into His mind that they should offer their children to idols, then how can you say He in fact decreed it before the world began?"

What can you say about his statement?

This is such a naïve and irresponsible abuse of Scripture that it has never entered my mind that it would be used against the doctrine of God's sovereignty over all things, that is, the doctrine that God is God. It is a good example of a person who is ignorant of theology, and refusing to acknowledge the context of the verse – not only the verses around the verse, but the words around an expression within the verse – he distorts a biblical passage to prove an unbiblical point.

First, we reaffirm the biblical distinction between divine decree and divine precept. Since I have explained and defended this in a number of places, I will offer only a summary. A divine decree is what God has decided to cause. A divine precept, on the other hand, has nothing to do with causation. It is God's definition of what is of truth and righteousness. It is his definition of man's moral obligation, and it often comes in the form of a command.

The verse says that God never commanded them to sacrifice their children to Molech. This provides the context to understand the expression that comes right after. The idea that "it never entered my mind" corresponds to "I never commanded." It emphasizes how far this practice was removed from God's commands. The verse is irrelevant to whether God decrees or causes evil. The teaching is affirmed in many other biblical passages, but it is not affirmed or denied here.

Some translations recognize this and render the verse accordingly. For example, the NLT reads, "They have built pagan shrines to Baal in the valley of the son of Hinnom, and there they sacrifice their sons and daughters to Molech. I have never commanded such a horrible deed; *it never even crossed my mind to command* such a thing. What an incredible evil, causing Judah to sin so greatly!" The verse does not say that "it never crossed my mind" to cause the evil, but to command the evil. If God had commanded it as their moral obligation, it would have been a righteous thing to do.

Thus I have answered this objection against the biblical doctrine, but this person is left with a problem.

For his objection to make sense, he must insist that the verse applies to God's decree, or his determination to cause. To him, then, the verse must mean either that it never crossed God's mind that *they would* perform such a thing, or that it never crossed God's mind that *he would* cause such a thing.

However, if the verse is interpreted to mean that it never crossed God's mind that *they would* do such a thing, then this amounts to a denial of God's foreknowledge. My position is that God's foreknowledge and God's foreordination are two sides of the same coin. He knows all things because he causes all things, and he knows himself, thus he knows all that he would cause. But even if I adopt the false idea that foreknowledge is mere prescience, or a passive knowledge of future events, this foreknowledge would still be denied by such an interpretation of the verse.

Then, if the verse is interpreted to mean that it never crossed God's mind that *he would* cause such a thing, it also amounts to a denial of God's foreknowledge, with the added blasphemy that God does not even know himself, since it would mean that he could not conceive of all the options possible for him. It would mean that he is incapable of hypothetical thought. However, to cause evil is clearly conceivable to him (he can grasp the concept), because according to this interpretation, he interacts with the idea in this verse. This interpretation should alarm believers and incite vehement condemnation against anyone who advocates it as a refutation of the doctrine that God causes all things, including evil.

It appears that this person indeed assumes the second interpretation, since he writes, "God is plainly stating that *this is not His doing*." Therefore, not only does he fail to accomplish his goal of refuting the doctrine of God's sovereignty, but he has placed himself in a most dangerous position. Since his use of the verse amounts to an attack against God's nature, even his omniscience, it calls into question his profession of faith. This is more than an argument for him to win or lose, but it is a sinful distortion of Scripture for him to be repented of, lest he faces God's displeasure for his irreverence and blasphemy.