

*The Author  
of Sin*

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# CONTENTS

<b>PREFACE</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>1. THE AUTHOR OF SIN</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>2. THE AUTHOR OF CONFUSION</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>3. WHY GOD CREATED EVIL</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>4. COMPATIBILIST FREEDOM</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>5. AUGUSTINE AND COMPATIBILISM</b> .....	<b>18</b>
<b>6. "SOFT" DETERMINISM</b> .....	<b>25</b>
<b>7. DETERMINISM, FATALISM, AND PANTHEISM</b> .....	<b>27</b>
<b>8. "APPARENT" CONTRADICTIONS</b> .....	<b>31</b>
<b>9. THE "SINCERE OFFER" OF THE GOSPEL</b> .....	<b>34</b>
<b>10. "FORCED TO BELIEVE"</b> .....	<b>37</b>
<b>11. FEW ARE CHOSEN</b> .....	<b>45</b>
<b>12. REVELATION OF GRACE</b> .....	<b>49</b>
<b>13. THE DOCTRINE OF HELL</b> .....	<b>50</b>
<b>14. EVIL AND PRIVATION</b> .....	<b>52</b>
<b>15. ARGUING BY INTUITION</b> .....	<b>53</b>
<b>16. THE PROBLEM OF EVIL</b> .....	<b>64</b>
<b>17. THE PRESERVATION OF THE SAINTS</b> .....	<b>81</b>
<b>18. FREEWILL OFFERINGS AND HUMAN FREEDOM</b> .....	<b>107</b>
<b>19. MORE THAN A POTTER</b> .....	<b>110</b>
<b>20. JEREMIAH 32:35</b> .....	<b>117</b>

## Preface

The first half of this book is a collection of short articles that mainly deal with divine sovereignty, human freedom, and the doctrines of grace. These articles explain and apply my thinking to particular contexts and questions, and as such, they properly supplement what I have previously written.

And because this book is best used as a supplement, if it is possible or convenient, I encourage you to first read my previous writings on these subjects before reading the articles in this book. This will help you to better understand the following articles.

Although I hope that you will read all of them, it is not necessary to read these articles in the order listed; rather, feel free to go directly to the articles that interest you and read them first.

Several of these articles were written in response to written messages sent to me by readers, and I usually include an edited version of the original question to accompany each of my replies.<sup>1</sup> I have withheld the names of the inquirers to protect their privacy. This is not a problem since the quoted statements do not contribute to the actual substance of the articles, but they provide only the contexts for me to present my answers and explanations.

To clearly distinguish the words of the inquirers, their statements are indented and displayed using a different font. This has eliminated the need for me to always specify that a certain article was written in answer to a question, or to specify that a certain portion of text was a message from a reader, since all of this will be obvious to any reader.

The second half of this book consists of previously published articles. The topics of these articles are consistent with the overall theme of the book, and therefore I consider it appropriate to put them together with the other articles in this volume.

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<sup>1</sup> Among other modifications, for some articles I have attached numbers to the other person's statements, so that you can more easily recognize the answers that correspond to them.

## 1. The Author of Sin

Apologetics is easy, but it is often made difficult by unbiblical traditions and irrational assumptions.

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,"<sup>2</sup> and some kind of freedom that in their minds would render man culpable,<sup>3</sup> 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 first reaction tends to be, "So what?" Even Christians who disagree with 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 half-decent explanation as to what's 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.

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<sup>2</sup> See Hodge, Dabney, Shedd, etc.

<sup>3</sup> But as I have repeatedly said, there is no established connection between freedom and culpability.

<sup>4</sup> "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).

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.

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 at all, but its concerns are completely different. It just tells you that God is not the tempter, which is altogether different from saying that God is not the author of sin.

That is, if God directly causes you to sin, it does make him the "author" of sin (at least in the sense that people usually use the expression), 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.

But 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 relatively 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 17<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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. A more detailed examination of verse 17 will have to wait until another time, but what I have just said already renders their interpretation of verse 17 impossible, so I need not say more for our present purpose. The point is that nothing in this passage from James denies (or affirms) that God is the author of sin.

The admitted motive and effect of the popular Reformed answer is to satisfy 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 at all.

In contrast, the biblical approach to this type of questions and objections is not to justify God, but to rebuke man for questioning and objecting 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?"

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<sup>5</sup> "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows."

<sup>6</sup> This article was originally presented after a discussion on Isaiah 45:7, which says, "I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things."

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. Dare you question me about this? Who are you to object?"

Although this verse might not conclusively settle every detail, unlike James 1:13, it does have something to do with 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 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.<sup>7</sup>

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 to this type of questions and objections. There are many biblical 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 just *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, "Yeah, 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?

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<sup>7</sup> Some make a distinction between natural and moral evil, but the Bible says that God causes both. See my article, "The Problem of Evil."

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.

And contrary to the typical response, Paul does not say, "Oh, no, you don't 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."

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.<sup>8</sup> 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?'"<sup>9</sup> 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. But 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.

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<sup>8</sup> Of course, this is just 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.

<sup>9</sup> Thus Paul affirms that the reprobates are *made* reprobates by God, only that they have no right to complain.

## 2. The Author of Confusion<sup>10</sup>

I learned a lot from the "Author of Sin" article.

I started reading it and kept thinking, "Yes, but what about that 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. Wow, 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 as fact, 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.

Great article and keen insight. I learned a lot.

Thanks for your comments.

Yes, this matter about the author of sin is just tradition, nothing more.

Although we should not focus on affirming or denying whether God is the author of sin (since this is not the Bible's own focus), but should rather positively focus on the sovereignty and majesty of God, there is in fact 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 – that is, 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.

Even 1 Corinthians 14:33 is easily explained.

First, we know from many biblical passages that God does cause confusion at times, such as when he acted against Israel's enemies in battle. Right away, this means that "the author of confusion" cannot be superficially understood, but must be truly understood within its context.

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<sup>10</sup> The following is an edited correspondence. This message from a pastor provides me the context to discuss 1 Corinthians 14:33, which is also used at times to support the idea that God cannot be the author of sin or evil.

The context is verse 40, which says, "Let all things be done decently and in order." That's 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, then, has more to do with God's approval or disapproval of the situation than the metaphysical cause.

But there is also a direct answer to the statement, and that is to point out that the word "author" is not in the text in the first place! If you check your interlinear Bible, the statement reads, "not for is of confusion God but of peace." There is no hint of the word or concept of "author" in there, but it was inserted by the translators.

Thus, the NIV translates: "For God is not a God of disorder but of peace," and other translations like the NASB and ESV are also similar. Of course, even the words "a God" have been inserted here, but it is better than inserting "author," which implies something that is not actually in the statement. 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 an orderly and rational plan.

### 3. Why God Created Evil

I've been enjoying the great articles as of late regarding who God is. The clear logic of your articles and the Bible is refreshing.

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

I haven't answered him yet, but wanted to think it through. Is his question a bad question? Should it be "cause" and not "create"?

What are your thoughts?

Thanks for affirming the Bible as the foundation of all our learning and not traditions that men so often teach. And thanks for your time.

To say "create" or "cause" would be just about the same thing in our context, and both words are applicable, so I think 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. That is, 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.<sup>11</sup>

Luther perceived the biblical and metaphysical absurdities of affirming anything short of the above; in contrast, the weak view (common to Reformed Christians today) is an unbiblical, unnecessary, irrational, and sophistical evasion. If our position is hyper-Calvinism (it is not), then it would simply mean that hyper-Calvinism is the correct and biblical view. And mislabeling it as fatalism doesn't do anything, either – it is the wimp's way out.

As for God's purpose for sin and evil, first, in boldly acknowledging the biblical truth that God is the sovereign and righteous "author of sin," we can note that even if we were unable to answer the question as to *why* he caused sin and evil, it would not pose a problem to Christianity, nor would it undermine what I've said about the "author of sin"

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<sup>11</sup> See Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, and Vincent Cheung, *Commentary on Ephesians*.

issue. That is, even if we do not have an answer to the question, there is no self-contradiction in our view, nor does our view contradict Scripture. It would just be a matter of a lack of information, and rationally speaking, this is all that is at stake.

That said, we do have an answer to the question, 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 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, at least one reason (it doesn't have to be the only reason) God created the reprobates (that is, to "create sin") is to provide a context through which he can reveal his wrath – something that the elect will otherwise never witness or experience. In other words, the reprobates are for the education and edification of the elect. They maintain a world of struggles and temptations for the elect, and at the end the elect will witness the outpouring of divine wrath against them. All of this serves to advance the sanctification of the elect and the declarative glory of God.

The following is taken from my *Systematic Theology*:

One important but neglected 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)

Theological knowledge – that is, intellectual 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. The scorn with which many professing believers regard

doctrinal studies shows that they do not truly love God, although they would like to think that they love him.

Jeremiah 9:23-24 tells us that our priority is 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)

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

One purpose of the reprobates – "the objects of his wrath" or those who are "prepared for destruction" – is that God 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 the elect will never experience, and therefore it must be demonstrated to them in other people. Recall that one benefit God gives to the elect is information or knowledge about himself, and this shows us to what lengths he will go to make himself known to his people.

Of course, people might not like this explanation, but it is the explicit teaching of Scripture. 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. Humanistic thinking will be horrified by this teaching, since it is more concerned about man's dignity and comfort than God's purpose and glory, but those with the mind of Christ will 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 immediately 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,<sup>12</sup> 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 whatsoever 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 hesitate 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.

Let's say 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 internal desire. But this desire was

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<sup>12</sup> 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.

caused and controlled by God, and the fact that I would always act on my strongest desire (which is human nature) was also caused by God. But 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.

Then, if we were to soften this and say that our desires are somehow not determined but merely permitted by God, then, even ignoring for now that this is unbiblical, we must still explain how it is possible for God to permit something without causing it, and yet immutably decree it to happen in a sense that is not merely an expression of prescience. If we can't, 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. That is, is it possible for a created thing to function at all under God's bare permission without his constant causative determination? How?

Calvin himself 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.

This is Calvinism – it is a consistent application of divine sovereignty over everything. It is a denial of any form of dualism or deism. Thus 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.

In summary, 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 (except from other creatures, which is irrelevant), but it is just a *description* of what happens when God controls every aspect of our decisions and actions, usually (not always) 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* Calvinistic and Reformed writers 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 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 or Christianity. If only freedom from sin is meant, then again this is irrelevant, since the relevant question in discussing divine determinism should be 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 on which our discussion is based comes from an introductory guide to Augustine and his philosophy,<sup>13</sup> our main focus here is in fact 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

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<sup>13</sup> I have numbered the paragraphs so that you can more easily locate the comments that correspond to each.

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.<sup>14</sup>

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." Sure, 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 generally good demonstration of how the tension (self-contradiction) in compatibilism is rather obvious to those who are not biased in favor of it.

I will offer some comments on each paragraph. Please remember that 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."

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<sup>14</sup> Sharon M. Kaye and Paul Thomson, *On Augustine* (Wadsworth, 2001), p. 25–26.

I affirm the meaningfulness of so-called "second causes" only in the sense that these are 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.

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, as I do, that it is a stretch to call compatibilist freedom "free."

Compatibilist freedom is "free" only in a private 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. You can call anything "free," but is it?

(2)

Note that 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. That is, instead of measuring freedom by whether our thoughts and actions are free *from God*, now 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.

But 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. Hooray!

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." But this use of "forced" and "free" is misleading, since if God is the cause of the cause of this action (as I affirm, and as many Calvinists admit), 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" at least 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.

Thus, 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 far 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. But 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 is just changing the reference point until he can use the word "free" in some sense.

It is misleading and dishonest to just 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)

Note that "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 just 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 rationally established. But if we will place moral responsibility back on where it belongs – that is, on God's sovereign decree to judge all of mankind – then human freedom becomes irrelevant, and there would be no problem in discarding it altogether.

(4)

Note 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. But then you ask them how that evil nature got there in the first place, and how Adam could have performed evil if he was created positively good, and they again 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 positively good. 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)

Note the remarkable restraint that these writers show toward compatibilism. They have everything set up fairly well, enough so 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."

More clearly, 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 just by doing the following:
  - a. Affirm that God is just and righteous by definition.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> This renders all "problem of evil" and "author of sin" type of objections inapplicable.

- b. Deny the unjustified premise, "responsibility presupposes freedom."<sup>16</sup>

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.

There are no inherent problems with the above, so the above cannot be directly attacked as incoherent. If any of the above points is individually challenged as false, then depending on the angle of the objection, the debate moves to a presuppositional or exegetical level, which should be just about the same thing for the Christian. Then, to prepare for this, the Christian should study the relevant biblical passages and learn how to apply them, which is his spiritual duty in the first place.

### **Additional Comments**

Here I will also 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."

Now, 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 yet 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 even remotely imply this – it is a forced inference. The verse tells us what the humans 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 clearly address this.

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<sup>16</sup> This renders human freedom irrelevant to the discussion.

Now, as I have established in my books and articles, 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)."

To repeat, the verse itself does not state or imply that the brothers "freely" intended evil – it just says that they intended evil. Then, it says that God intended good concerning this same (evil) decision/action performed by the brothers. Adding to this the premise (established by other biblical 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 at all, although it is often forced into the discussion.

Apply a similar basic analysis to all the verses used by compatibilists, and you will see that none of them really support compatibilism. It appears that compatibilists are already so convinced of their position apart from Scripture that they easily "see" it taught in these verses even when they do not address the topic at all.

It is self-defeating to embrace a tradition that really has been a burden to Calvinism rather than a support, making it incoherent and hard to defend, and making its adherents look like fools when they unnecessarily retreat into mystery and paradox.

Granted, a bold and consistent Calvinism is even more offensive than a half-baked and inconsistent Calvinism, but it is also biblical, coherent, and irrefutable.

## 6. "Soft" Determinism

Let me make an observation about the term "soft determinism." Although I do not completely oppose its use, it does seem to be loaded language, and allows its adherents to appear better than they really should.

Now, "soft" determinism is used in contrast with "hard" determinism. Using these terms, the popular Reformed/Calvinistic position, which is compatibilism, would be called "soft" determinism, whereas my position would be called "hard" determinism.

The former is "softer" in quality and/or in quantity regarding the level and/or amount of control (determinism) that God exercises over his creation, whereas "hard" determinism is absolute, affirming that God exercises complete (in level or quality) and comprehensive (in amount or quantity) control over everything.

But this means that "soft" determinism is really *partial* determinism – that is, partial (not full) either in quality or in quantity, or both. And if what God does not absolutely determine can still actually happen, then this means that there is another (one or more) determining power in the universe. When we are speaking of God's relation to man, attributing only partial determinism to God necessarily implies attributing partial determinism to man also. So this becomes a version of dualism.

In other words, 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 level (extent) and the amount of control exercised. To believe anything less than this is not full; therefore, it is partial.

Also, since "soft" determinism really means *partial* determinism, this also necessarily means that it is partial *indeterminism* (that is, partial *non-determinism*). Granted, since Calvinists usually (claim to) affirm greater determining power to God than man, this indeterminism is a very "soft" indeterminism, but it is still partial indeterminism.

It becomes just a matter of emphasis as to which term one wishes to use. So the term "soft" determinism is at least a little misleading, making its adherents look better than they really should. To some, it has the effect of sounding "softer," kinder, and less extreme. But if we don't let the language deceive us, we see that it is really partial determinism, weak determinism, incomplete determinism, or "soft" *indeterminism*. And, at least by implication, dualism.

On the other hand, since we who affirm "hard" determinism in fact affirm just "determinism," there is no need to qualify it if not for a contrast or a challenge from a partial version. I do not need to constantly say that I am a full human unless I am in a discussion involving partial humans – I am just human. And in the context of a contrast,

what we affirm is really *full* determinism, not "hard." Also, when we flip it around, we can confidently say that we affirm non-indeterminism (zero indeterminism) when it comes to the level and amount of control that God exercises over his creation.

Of course, the above does not directly argue about the merits of the two views, but it is an observation about the loaded language often used.

## 7. Determinism, Fatalism, and Pantheism<sup>17</sup>

Sometimes people ask me about fatalism. Most of these are polite and teachable individuals who would like to know what determinism and fatalism are, how they differ from each other, and how my position differs from fatalism.<sup>18</sup> And then, there are some who outright accuse me of teaching fatalism. The following will suffice as my response to both groups of people.

By some definitions, the terms "determinism" and "fatalism" are similar. Some English dictionaries would define these terms in ways that 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 ambiguous definitions, since then they would become "soft fatalists" at best. 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 specially 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.<sup>19</sup> He defines "fatalism" as follows: "The theory of inevitable necessity; the heathen oriental

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<sup>17</sup> 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). Of course, when it comes to 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.

<sup>18</sup> Here are two examples: (1) "But I was wondering what your stance is on fatalism? Is fatalism and determinism the same?" (2) "I was wondering how you would differentiate between hard determinism and fatalism. The reason I ask is because it seems to me that most Calvinists which hold to soft determinism are striving to avoid the charge of being fatalists."

<sup>19</sup> Alan Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms*, p. 186.

philosophy that all things are predetermined by *blind, irrational forces* and that therefore there is *no point in human effort* to change anything."<sup>20</sup>

Now, before the sight of God, who dares accuse me of teaching that "all things are predetermined by *blind, irrational forces*"? To do so would be to commit the sin of slander, and some have indeed committed this sin against me by their false accusations. Rather, I affirm that it is the *personal* and *rational* God who has predetermined all things.

And who dares accuse me of teaching that all things occur as predetermined *regardless of means*? I affirm that God determines all things by immutably foreordaining and directly controlling both the ends and the means. Therefore, 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 predetermined results.

It is dangerous to speak of things that you do not understand, and it appears that those who accuse me of teaching fatalism are ignorant of what fatalism really means.

Just as some Arminians falsely accuse the Calvinists of teaching fatalism, these Calvinists who affirm "soft" determinism turn around and accuse me of teaching fatalism, but neither the Arminians nor the Calvinists have any idea what fatalism means. These people do not have the courtesy to even look up the word in a theological dictionary to make sure that the accusation applies. And they certainly don't have the minimal theological background to understand what fatalism means without looking it up.

As for those of you who are attentive and teachable – unlike those who make ignorant and slanderous accusations, pretending to be scholars when they are not – I do not blame you for asking about this, since there is much false information being circulated.

Rest assured that what I teach, although it is a stronger version of determinism than the one that you are accustomed to hearing, it is very different from fatalism. In fact, it is as different from fatalism as theism is different from paganism and atheism, since I affirm that all things are determined by the personal and sovereign God, and not by "blind, irrational forces."

Therefore, do not let ignorant people confuse or deceive you.

Then, I will also point out something that is commonly misunderstood, namely, some people assume that one has more freedom under "determinism" and that things are more comprehensively determined in "fatalism." But this is false.

The fact is that things are *more* determined in divine determinism than in any other scheme. Under "fatalism" (as properly defined above), an event is predetermined in such a way that the same outcome will result "no matter what you do," that is, regardless of means. But under divine determinism, although it "matters" what you do, "what you do" is also immutably predetermined in the first place. And it "matters" because there is a

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 176.

definite relationship between "what you do" and the outcome, although even this relationship is determined and controlled by God.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, I affirm divine determinism and not fatalism, but not for the reason that people sometimes 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.

While I am at it, there are those who charge that my determinism and occasionalism amount to pantheism.<sup>22</sup> But this is also stupid and ignorant. If pantheism affirms that "all is God," then it means that when God acts on any object, he is always acting only on himself. But this is far from what I affirm. Rather, I affirm that God has created spiritual and material entities that are *other than* himself, but that he nevertheless completely sustains and controls. To say that God completely *controls* X is very different from saying that God *is* X.

In fact, for my opponents 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.<sup>23</sup> But then, 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.

That is, by their accusation against me, they imply that God is *identified* with anything over which he has direct and total control. Then, since they deny my teaching that God has direct and total control over all things, and since they at the same time deny that God is identified with the universe, it follows that they believe God has no direct and total control over *anything* in the universe.<sup>24</sup> And if this is what they believe, then they are not even Christians.

This is the implication of what *they* believe from their accusation against me. Of course, I am not actually accusing them of believing this, but it is the logical implication, and the charitable conclusion is that they are at least inconsistent.

In any case, as with the charge of fatalism, these people have no idea what pantheism means, and to accuse me of explicitly or implicitly teaching pantheism is nothing but slander.

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<sup>21</sup> What are people going to accuse me of now? I can't be accused of teaching fatalism, since I am saying that fatalism is too weak! But slanderers will think of something.

<sup>22</sup> See A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*.

<sup>23</sup> Otherwise, they would not charge me with teaching pantheism when I affirm that God directly and totally controls all things.

<sup>24</sup> 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 (creation and creatures), it follows that *they believe* that God has no direct and total control over creation and creatures.

In other words, the objection betrays the assumption that God is (identified with) whatever he completely controls. And because 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" can at best be a relative term that cannot attribute any inherent causative power to any created object, etc.), then Vincent Cheung must be teaching pantheism.

Now, after pointing out the unjustified 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. It is at this point that the objection backfires. Because *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 at least modified or partial pantheists. Holding constant *their* assumption, the only logical alternative is for them to deny that God completely controls *anything* in his creation, but then they are not even theists anymore.

Therefore, logically speaking, those who use this objection affirm either partial pantheism or finite godism, neither of which allows them to consistently call themselves Christians. On the other hand, I affirm that God completely controls everything about everything that is anything, and that this does not imply that he is identified with those things that he controls; rather, his creation is something *other than* himself, but it is nevertheless something that he completely controls.

## 8. "Apparent" Contradictions

Many Reformed writers assert that there is an "antinomy," paradox, or so-called apparent contradiction between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. I disagree – there is no such apparent contradiction. For example, Packer makes this mistake in his book on evangelism. As Luther also points out 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 it's all imaginary in the first place. Reformed writers should be much more careful about this.

It is indeed possible that two propositions can appear contradictory to a person when they are in fact not logically contradictory. The problem, then, is with the person and not the propositions. Maybe he has made a mistake in reasoning, or maybe he lacks some information that he needs to correctly understand the propositions.

I contend that (and this is the unpopular point) as long as two propositions appear contradictory to a person (whether or not they are logically contradictory), he cannot truly affirm both propositions. This is because for two propositions to be contradictory (whether in appearance or in reality), it necessarily means that to affirm one is at the same time to deny the other. Therefore, to affirm two contradictory propositions is really to deny both in reverse order.

That is, if X and Y are contradictory, 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, so on *ad infinitum*. Therefore, to affirm two contradictory propositions (whether contradictory in appearance or in reality) is to say nothing, or worse than nothing.

I agree that when a person sees two propositions in Scripture that appear to him to contradict one another, he should believe that the contradiction is only in his own mind, and that the propositions appear to contradict only because of his own lack of understanding or fallacious reasoning, and not because there is a real logical contradiction. But I would insist that as long as the two propositions appear contradictory to him, he still cannot truly affirm both at the same time.

Since Scripture really does not contradict itself, this is just another way of saying that a person cannot truly affirm a biblical proposition until he truly and correctly understands what the proposition means. Or, a person cannot truly affirm a part of Scripture that he does not truly and correctly understand. If he does not understand what a proposition means, then whatever he is affirming is not really that proposition, but some other proposition in his mind. This point is correct by necessity. To oppose it would be to

suggest that one can affirm a proposition that has not even entered his mind, which is nonsense.

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 one'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 what really happens when a person sees an "apparent" contradiction in Scripture. One or both sides of the alleged contradiction is really not the biblical proposition, because it has been distorted or misunderstood.

Or, a person might correctly understand propositions X and Y, but then he also affirms some other 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 once you impose the premise "responsibility presupposes freedom" (Q). All of a sudden, it appears that X contradicts Y. In fact, if Q is true, then this would be a *real* contradiction, and not only an apparent one. But once we realize that Q is false, even the appearance of a contradiction disappears. The key, then, is to correctly understand what Scripture says, and to avoid adding to it false ideas that do not come from Scripture at all.

To summarize, if a person understands what the Bible is saying in every instance, then in no instance will two propositions in the Bible even appear contradictory to him. This is because in reality no two propositions in the Bible contradict each other. But if the person does not always correctly understand the Bible, then in some cases two propositions might appear to contradict. In those cases, he can still "know" that the contradiction is only "apparent," since both propositions are found in the Bible. However, he cannot affirm both as long as they still appear contradictory to him. What must he do? He must study to grasp the true meaning of each proposition, and when that happens, he will perceive that the contradiction never really existed in the first place.

Failing to understand and acknowledge the above, Christians are often too quick to scream "Mystery!" and "Paradox!" when confronted with biblical propositions that are obviously non-contradictory unless *made* contradictory by some spectacular distortion or some strange extra-biblical assumption. This is not a sign of genuine reverence. It is in fact an implicit 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. In the light of this, it appears almost trivial to mention that this illegitimate appeal to mystery and paradox also unnecessarily grants ammunition to the enemies of the faith.

Thus if we wish to truly honor the greatness of God, we should boldly and reverently affirm that Scripture is clear, and clearly non-contradictory in every respect.

## 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.<sup>25</sup> My position is that it makes God into a schizophrenic fool. It is unbiblical and irrational, and thus must be rejected and opposed.

First, 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 determine for ourselves who are the elect and the non-elect, and then preach the gospel only to those whom we consider the elect. Rather, we must indiscriminately preach the gospel to all men.

On the other hand, it is wrong and sinful to preach the gospel as if there is a chance for even 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 precise content of God's decree in election (as in who are the elect and who are the non-elect), and so we must not act as if we know. However, it does not follow that we should speak as if election is false when we preach the gospel.

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

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<sup>25</sup> These terms are not always used consistently or with precision, so that they represent a small range of meanings. It is also true that not all who deny the "sincere offer" believe exactly the same things. Therefore, those who affirm the "sincere offer" might find themselves agreeing with me on certain points while others who affirm the "sincere offer" might disagree with those same points. Likewise, not everything that I say about or against the "sincere offer" applies equally to everyone who affirms the teaching. In addition, those who affirm the "sincere offer" are often inconsistent in their language. For example, one might be denouncing those who deny the "sincere offer," and then proceed to speak about the issue as concerning a "command," as if an offer and a command are the same thing, when they are not the same at all. These inconsistencies make a precise discussion on the topic more difficult. Another reason for confusion is that those who affirm the "sincere offer" often make unwarranted assumptions about those who deny it. For example, some of those who affirm the "sincere offer" assume that those who deny it would necessarily oppose the preaching of the gospel indiscriminately to all men. But this is not true – those who deny the "sincere offer" might still indiscriminately preach the gospel to all men, but they do so for a different reason and based on a different understanding of the situation. Thus the best way to profit from our brief discussion is to consider the actual beliefs that I am dealing with, whether in my affirmations or denials, and not necessarily how the term is used in a particular case or by a particular person. For example, you might be someone who affirms the "sincere offer," but you might find that I am not addressing exactly what you believe. In such instances, it is best to consider the very beliefs that I am addressing, instead of whether or not you would consider them as necessarily part of what someone who affirms the "sincere offer" must believe.

Faith comes only as God's sovereign gift, and God has immutably decided to withhold this gift from the non-elect, but rather to actively harden them; therefore, to sincerely 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 real or sincere offer of salvation to the non-elect, but only a real and serious command that they can never obey, and one that God will enforce against them with hellfire.

Again, this does not prevent us from indiscriminately preaching the gospel to all men, since it is neither our right nor duty 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,"<sup>26</sup> and as if it is possible for even the non-elect to be saved. Rather, 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).

In other words, the content and the preaching of the gospel could be and should be completely consistent with the doctrines of election and reprobation, as well as all other related doctrines. For many people, to affirm the "sincere offer" is merely an excuse to believe like a Calvinist, but preach like an Arminian.

It follows that, when preaching the gospel (when we are dealing with the grace that saves), we should not tell our hearers that God loves all of them, but we should boldly declare that God loves only the elect and desires (and thus has decreed) their salvation, and that he hates the reprobates and desires (and thus has decreed) their damnation (Romans 9:13).

In the light of this, let us now summarize the biblical understanding and approach of evangelism.

We are duty-bound to indiscriminately preach the gospel to all men for at least three reasons: 1. God commands us to preach the gospel to every person, 2. We do not know and should not try to discover 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, but also to harden the reprobates.

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<sup>26</sup> Scripture teaches that God decrees what he desires – that is, his "good pleasure" – and what he desires, he decrees and makes certain. Dabney tries to preserve the "sincere offer" by asserting that there are complex motives in God, so that although God might genuinely desire the salvation of the non-elect from one perspective, another stronger motive or reason in him overrides such a desire, and this is why he has not chosen to save the non-elect. It seems to Dabney that this explanation preserves both his belief in divine election of only some for salvation, and God's genuine desire to save everyone in one sense. However, even if we accept what Dabney says about complex motives in God, at the point of the divine decree of only some for salvation and then at the point of the preaching of the gospel, the stronger motive to select only some for salvation has *already* overridden the genuine desire to save all (that is, assuming that this desire exists at all), so that neither the divine decree nor the preaching of the gospel any longer expresses or allows for any desire in God to save all. In other words, even if God's *motives* are complex, the *decree* and the *preaching* are not complex, but the decree and the preaching are precisely what we are talking about. Therefore, even if Dabney is right about complex motives in God, it is irrelevant to our discussion.

It is right and proper 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 right and proper 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 actively harden their minds against the gospel, making it impossible for them to believe.

Just as we should not and could not discover beforehand who are the elect and who are the reprobates, neither must our hearers 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. In other words, upon hearing the gospel, one should not say to himself, "God saves only the elect, and I am probably among the reprobates anyway, so I should not even try to seek God for salvation." In fact, one who stubbornly thinks this way even when confronted with a clear explanation of the gospel of sovereign grace might indeed be one of the reprobates, and God has chosen to confirm this person in his damnation by means of this persistent deception.

Rather than concealing or misrepresenting the eternal decree of God to our hearers, when preaching the gospel, we should explain to them the truths that has immediate relevance to sin and grace, and to election and reprobation. But more than that, we should present to them the whole system of biblical doctrines, as clearly and comprehensively as we can manage and as time allows (Acts 17:23-31; Matthew 28:19-20; Luke 14:27-33). Then, we must admonish our hearers to sincerely and earnestly seek God for salvation through Christ by the means of grace, such as prayer, listening to sermons, and reading the Bible.

Since it would be impossible to *sincerely* seek or call upon God unless his power is already at work within a person's heart, those who indeed sincerely obey and call out to God to save them through Christ are surely among the elect, in whom God has already started his sovereign work of conversion. But those who insincerely or superficially obey, and who after a while fall away, or those who refuse to obey 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).

Therefore, in rejecting the so-called "sincere offer" of the gospel, the preaching of the gospel is neither diminished nor rendered narrow and selective. Instead, the above is a consistent and necessary application of the explicit and implicit teachings 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 explicitly teaches about the purpose and the effect of the indiscriminate preaching of the gospel, that is, to summon the elect and to harden the reprobates.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> See David Engelsma, *Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel* and *Common Grace Revisited* for more on this subject.

## 10. "Forced to Believe"

I have talked much about "inconsistent" Calvinism in various places and from various perspectives. Here I would like to use A. A. Hodge to give you an example of what inconsistent Calvinism can make a person say.

But we will first get something out of the way. In using Hodge as an example, I am not challenging his orthodoxy, or his dedication to Scripture, Christianity, and Calvinism. In fact, it is precisely because his orthodoxy is generally unchallenged that I prefer to use him as an example, so you will see that the problem is not found only in crazy heretics or stumbling idiots.

Now let us begin.

In the context of discussing creation *ex nihilo*, 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.<sup>28</sup>

In other words, the biblical doctrine of creation is "inconceivable," but that's all right because "many other" biblical doctrines are *also* inconceivable – and that makes it all better!

Are we expected to swallow this? The better question would be whether the Bible talks about its own doctrines this way. Does the Bible say that its own doctrines are rationally inconceivable?<sup>29</sup> Does the Bible say that its own doctrines are rationally so difficult to accept, that we must be "forced to believe" them?<sup>30</sup>

If we answer in the negative – if the Bible does not call its own doctrines "inconceivable" and that we must be "forced to believe" them – then in this instance, and in all other instances when Hodge writes this way, he is not representing what the Bible really teaches. Rather, he is measuring biblical doctrines against some anti-biblical standard. Since what is biblical is incompatible with what is anti-biblical, then if he insists on affirming both, then of course the biblical doctrines all of a sudden become "inconceivable," and of course one would feel as if he is being "forced to believe" them. But the problem is in Hodge's own mind, and not in the biblical system of doctrines.

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<sup>28</sup> A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1999 edition), p. 240.

<sup>29</sup> I add "rationally" because this is the sense in which Hodge means it.

<sup>30</sup> And if something is "inconceivable," then you cannot even hold it in your mind (you cannot "conceive" it), but then how, whether "forced" or not, can you believe it? You cannot even think it.

Many Calvinists talk like Hodge does – STOP IT! It is not a sign of faith and reverence to sound like a lunatic and then drag God into it.

What? You are trying to defend Christian doctrine, and you are calling your own worldview "inconceivable," and that you are "forced to believe" it? It is this kind of unbiblical and irrational statements that non-Christians often exploit. Now, what do you think I should do if someone were to bring this quote up in a debate? For the proper defense of the gospel, I must renounce Hodge, at least on this point. I must say that, at least on this point (but also on many other points), he neither speaks for me nor for Scripture – he is wrong.

In contrast, I say that although they might not be exhaustively grasped (since God's mind is infinitely greater than ours, and therefore we cannot exhaustively learn all its contents), all that God has revealed – all biblical doctrines – are conceivable, understandable, reasonable, defensible, and undeniable.

Because unbelievers are sinful and irrational, it is impossible for them to affirm that which is holy and rational, and therefore unless God directly acts upon their minds and changes them, they will never believe. However, all the biblical doctrines are easy for the elect to believe because God has granted them the gift of faith and made them rational by enlightening their minds.

Biblical doctrines are inconceivable only if measured against some irrational premise or standard. What we need to do is to cast aside these false principles and assumptions that are not part of the biblical worldview in the first place. But if you are going to take principles and assumptions from two contradictory worldviews and try to jam them together, then, yes, you are going to end up with something inconceivable. Just don't call that Christianity or Calvinism.

Hodge's errors and inconsistencies are widespread, and common to most Calvinists that I have read, although I try to read only the best. So this is a serious problem, and I would like to give more examples so that you will know what to look out for when studying theological works. Nevertheless, since in my own writings I have already addressed all the problems that are present in Hodge,<sup>31</sup> I will offer only very brief comments for each example, and sometimes I will just state my position and move on, lest this articles become too long.

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

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<sup>31</sup> You can find my explanations and arguments to everything brought up in this article in my *Systematic Theology*, *Ultimate Questions*, *Commentary on Ephesians*, and the articles, "The Problem of Evil," "Arguing by Intuition," and "The Sincere Offer of the Gospel."

permission; and that it shall rebound to the glory of God and to the good of his chosen.<sup>32</sup>

Sin occurs not just by bare permission. Sin is not "an insolvable mystery," since Scripture explains it to us. Hodge makes the issue "dark" enough already without help.

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 futurity of the act foreseen....<sup>33</sup>

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.<sup>34</sup>

This is *exactly* how many Arminians and Open Theists explain God's sovereignty, that God exercises his "sovereignty" over men merely by placing them in certain situations in which God foreknows how they would think and act, rather than directly acting upon their minds to determine their thoughts and actions. What Hodge says here is not just inconsistent Calvinism – it is not Calvinism or Christianity at all.

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.<sup>35</sup>

He talks like this throughout his book, but whereas some of these passages explicitly state that the acts were predetermined by God, *none* of them say that those acts were free. In fact, it is rather obvious that these passages explicitly prove the very opposite of what Hodge claims, that all those acts were predetermined by God in a way that the men were not free. The "freedom" thus revealed is purely in Hodge's question-begging imagination.

Moreover, Hodge never proves that responsibility presupposes freedom, which is an unbiblical premise that has tainted most Calvinistic writings and crippled many of their arguments, and it is a premise that I have repeatedly challenged and conclusively refuted.

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<sup>32</sup> Hodge, p. 160.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 203.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

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 can not 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.<sup>36</sup>

Just because Hodge is puzzled about something does not mean that it is a "great mystery, of which no explanation can be given." It is not a mystery if the Scripture clearly explains it, and it does.

Then, none of the three points prove that God cannot be the author of sin.

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 just shows us *what* he has authored.

The second point also fails. It does not even begin to tell us why God cannot be the author of sin; rather, if God is the author of sin, it tells us that his act of authoring sin is a holy act. To "author" sin is not the same thing as to sin.

The third point begs the question, because in the previous pages of the book, he has tried but fail 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 outright false. Yes, Scripture *blames* sinful actions on men, and says that God will judge them, but it does *attribute* them to the sovereign decree and active power of God.

In the best Calvinists, you will usually 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. This is no exaggeration.

If we are going to be Christians, then let's discard all non-Christian premises, and if we are going to be Calvinists, then let's renounce all Arminian assumptions. Hodge is so severely crippled in his reasoning because he is dragging all the weight of Arminianism and humanism with him while he tries to be a Calvinist. Most Calvinists are doing the same thing.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 211.

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.<sup>37</sup>

This is against both the Scripture and the Reformers.<sup>38</sup> In fact, 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 system of religion, natural or revealed, will enable us satisfactorily to account for.<sup>39</sup>

Hodge did not write this paragraph, but he is quoting Archbishop Whately with approval. But then Whately must have never heard of a "system of religion" called *Christianity*, and what it says in Romans 9 and other places.

The question assumes that God's sole purpose for a person is his holiness and happiness, but this is not true. It is as if this person is completely oblivious to what Scripture teaches, and what Calvinism affirms.

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.<sup>40</sup>

This paragraph made me laugh out loud, and I couldn't help but smile even looking at it again just now – it 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, and if this contradicts divine foreknowledge, then divine foreknowledge would

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> See Vincent Cheung, "The Problem of Evil," and *Commentary on Ephesians*. Also see Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*.

<sup>39</sup> Hodge, p. 227.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 228.

be impossible (and not that human freedom is false). However, since divine foreknowledge is also true, then human freedom must be compatible with divine foreknowledge.

But how about saying that since divine foreknowledge is true, then human freedom is false?<sup>41</sup> With Hodge, the compatibility of the two are not logically or biblically demonstrated, but asserted by force because he is unwilling to let go of either divine foreknowledge or human freedom, and especially human freedom, at least in this paragraph.

As for "The decree of election does not cause the faith," either he has something very peculiar in mind that he fails to explain (I can't imagine what), or it is an outright denial of Calvinism and Christianity.

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.<sup>42</sup>

This is just a convoluted way of admitting that the unbiblical doctrine of the "sincere offer" is incoherent. Since Hodge falsely thinks that it is taught in Scripture, he is compelled to swallow it. But it is not an "apparent difficulty" – the problem is called *schizophrenia*. For Hodge, the difficulty is compounded when he considers that God foresees that the non-elect's rejection of the gospel will increase their guilt.

But the biblical doctrine is straightforward and coherent. There is no "sincere offer." God commands men everywhere to repent – the elect will obey and be saved, but the reprobates will disobey and be damned. Moreover, by God's active decree and providence, the reprobates are already sinful and destined for hell, and the hearing and rejection of the gospel increases that guilt, and this is exactly 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.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Again, Scripture teaches human *responsibility*, not human *freedom*, and responsibility does not presuppose freedom.

<sup>42</sup> Hodge, p. 229.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 261.

Hodge is trying to refute continuous creation. Right now, the issue is not whether continuous creation is correct, but the issue is that his refutation is terrible.

Among other things, this is a spectacular display of begging the question. 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 certainly does not tell me all that he is claiming here. Second, he fails to show that our intuition is infallible; 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, but he fails to show that we must reject absolute skepticism in the first place, or that there are no other ways to avoid skepticism other than to trust our intuition.

Then, when he attempts a positive construction on the subject, he writes:

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.<sup>44</sup>

But he fails to show that our intuition really tells us all of this (mine doesn't), nor does he establish that it is "native and necessary"; yet, he is trying to establish the biblical doctrine of providence on this flimsy 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.<sup>45</sup>

This also begs the question. 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." But he fails to prove anything here. 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."

Again, my purpose is not to show how bad Hodge is; in fact, he is already better than many people. Rather, my purpose is to encourage you to abandon the false assumptions and poor habits exhibited by many Christian theologians, including many respected Reformed and Calvinistic authors.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 261-262.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 291.

Instead, we must adopt a thoroughly biblical, coherent, and defensible theology. Such a theology will edify the elect, silence the reprobates, and glorify the God whose written revelation exhibits perfect rationality, without any "inconceivable" nonsense that we are "forced to believe."

## 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 concept of election in itself does not necessarily imply 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 is mainly 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 in absolute terms, or relative to zero. But this does not tell us whether the number of people saved will be greater relative to the number of people damned. Some people have failed to note this point and thus have mistakenly inferred from these two passages that the number of those saved will be greater than those damned in the end.

The question is how many will be saved relative to the unsaved, not relative to zero. The two verses from Matthew appear very relevant. One says "few are those who find it" and the other says, "few are chosen." If these two verses are broadly addressing the question, then here is our answer – not only will the number of the saved be smaller than the number of the unsaved, but it will be *much* smaller, since Jesus is contrasting between the "many" and the "few."

There are those who assert that these two passages cannot function as a broad answer to our question, because the contexts suggest that they are addressing only the first century situation. At this time, I am unconvinced that this is correct, but I am willing to examine additional exegetical arguments in favor of this position.

In considering our question, it is important to dismiss right away some of the popular but empty arguments.

For example, it is popular to argue that the number of the saved will certainly be much greater than the unsaved because God will surely seize the "victory" in the end; that is, he will never "lose" to Satan in the battle between good and evil, and over human souls. Some of the most prominent Reformed theologians of the past and the present have argued this way.

But this argument 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 produce biblical evidence or any kind of rational support for using this premise or standard. Then, the argument is self-defeating because if we were to define "victory" by sheer numbers, then even if *one* person ends up in hell, it would necessarily mean that God has failed to obtain total victory over Satan and evil. But *many* people are *already* in hell.

Although it is used by more than a few Reformed theologians, this argument carries a certain dualistic flavor. It implies that Satan is a powerful evil force with whom even God himself must contend, that God will win some and lose some, even if he will win more than he loses in the end. What a pathetic view of God! What an anti-scriptural understanding of redemptive history! When a Calvinist is using this argument (or any other like it on any other topic), he is being inconsistent with his own otherwise sound and biblical beliefs.

Now, 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 God himself has predetermined to send them there?

God could only "lose" if what he has predetermined fails to happen, or if what he has not predetermined still happens anyway. For example, 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. But it is plainly stupid to say that God loses if more people end up in

hell than in heaven even if this is exactly what he wants, and even if this is what he has predetermined to happen. In fact, if God had decided that every sinner should end up in hell, then we could say that he loses even if one person manages to enter heaven.

So, whether more people will end up in heaven than in hell in itself has no direct relevance to whether God "wins" or "loses"; rather, if what happens is exactly what God has predetermined to happen, then he wins.

There are other arguments that people use to show that the number of the saved will be greater than the number of the unsaved, but almost all of them are ineffective, if not entirely absurd.

I say *almost* all of them are ineffective, because there is one doctrine that, if shown to be biblical and relevant, could establish that the number of the saved will indeed be greater than the unsaved. I am referring to postmillennialism. The doctrine teaches that, according to numerous prophecies in both the Old and New Testaments, before the return of Christ, the gospel will increasingly become successful and influential, not only in the social and political spheres, but especially in the hearts of men, so that it will dominate the world for an extended period of time. The most biblical and coherent version of postmillennialism affirms that the "millennium" began in the first century, and will terminate at the return of Christ. Meanwhile, although the influence of the gospel will fluctuate, it will eventually overcome all oppositions to become the dominating spiritual force in the hearts of men, and thus also in society in general.

Now, if postmillennialism is correct, then it is indeed possible that more people will be saved than unsaved, that more will end up in heaven than in hell. But I say that this is merely *possible*, because we must still establish two things to make way for such a conclusion.

First, we must still establish that the two passages from Matthew (and all other similar passages) are indeed referring to the first century situation, and not for all time.

Second, we must establish, if at all possible, 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. In fact, this period 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 is why I said that postmillennialism must be both biblical and relevant to our question for it to be an effective argument in favor of more people ending up in heaven than in hell. If the period in which the gospel will dominate the world is not long enough to compensate for all the previous centuries of relative darkness, then the number of unsaved people could still be greater than the number of those who will be saved.

Of course, if it is impossible to satisfy the first condition above, then the second one is also excluded. In other words, if the two passages from Matthew are indeed saying that, as a general rule for all time, more people will remain unsaved than those who are saved, then by necessary implication, the period during which the gospel will dominate the world in the hearts of men will not be long enough to put more people in heaven than in hell.

We can be certain about one thing, that all things will happen exactly as God has predetermined, and therefore he "wins" even if more people will end up in hell than in heaven.

## 12. Revelation of Grace

I am reading your *Systematic Theology* right now, and I must say that my entire thinking has been shaken.

In the past month, I have come to accept the Calvinistic doctrines, and your written materials have taught me so much more from Scripture in the past few days.

It is incredibly refreshing to hear a pastor preach from *just* the Bible and make strong cases from it.

I am so grateful to God that He has chosen me, and your teachings on election and reprobation prove to me more and more just how blessed I am that God has had mercy on me, not because of anything in me, but so that He may glorify himself.

I still have much of your work to read, but I just wanted to say thank you and let you know how God has used you to change my thinking.

Thanks for your comments.

What we call Calvinism, of course, is the Bible's own teachings concerning the nature of God, man, redemption, and salvation. It teaches that God is sovereign, just, and gracious, that man is depraved, helpless, and hopeless, that Christ has surely but only redeemed the elect, and that the only way for sinful man to be saved is for the sovereign God to save him, actively and powerfully, and then also permanently.

If not for the numerous deviations from these biblical teachings, there would be no need to identify it with any person's name, except that of Jesus Christ. But as it is, Calvinism is nothing more than a systematic expression of the biblical revelation of grace. It is the gospel, and it is what we must believe and preach. The elect will respond with gratitude and reverence; the reprobate will respond with disgust and scorn.

The Bible also teaches us about God's power, wrath, and justice in reprobation. But even the reprobates can do nothing except by God's active power, as Luther says, energizing and even compelling them to sin, in accordance with the evil nature that God has also placed in them after the pattern of Adam. Thus nothing is free in any sense from God's active power and control.

Just as the potteries for noble purposes cannot make themselves out of a lump of clay, neither can the potteries for common purposes make themselves, but it is God who actively and sovereignly creates and arranges both to be what they are. This is what Scripture consistently teaches.

### 13. The Doctrine of Hell

Below is a summary of my position regarding the doctrine of hell. Some of the points (or the specific details within those points) are unpopular and controversial. I am aware of the objections. I have carefully considered them, and I possess biblically and rationally definitive answers against them. Some of these I have already provided in my books and articles, and I plan to address the remaining ones in future writings. Thus until undeniable biblical arguments are offered to refute any of the following points, or any of the details in the following points, I shall continue to insist that all of them are biblical and coherent, and thus necessary and unnegotiable.

I am so strongly stating my position on these points because some of my beliefs on the subject are passionately opposed by many people, including those who call themselves Reformed and Calvinistic Christians. However, the truth is that if we were to remove all the unbiblical, unnecessary, and unjustified assumptions that they affirm, it would become clear that the following points represent the only biblical and coherent position.

That said, I present to you the following ten points:

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.<sup>46</sup>
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.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> 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 at all), 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.

<sup>47</sup> We find an analogy in the existence/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

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.<sup>48</sup>

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 indiscriminately 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.<sup>49</sup>

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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. To put it simply, 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.

<sup>48</sup> 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 even remotely implies disapproval of or repulsion toward hell, as if to say that God did something wrong in creating it. To disapprove of or be repulsed by hell is not a sign of biblical compassion, but a sign of sinful rebellion that desires human welfare and comfort even apart from faith and holiness, and apart from dependence on the grace of God.

<sup>49</sup> I have in mind the so-called "sincere offer" of the gospel.

## 14. 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."

We must first clearly define the problem or question. Let me see if I understand what you are getting at. You seem to imply that since evil is a privation, that since it is not a "thing" in itself, then this is inconsistent with God being the cause or author of all things. I am not certain that this is your point, but it appears to be, so I will proceed with the assumption that this is your point. If it is not, you can reply to clarify.

Now, we might say that evil does not have an ontological status like good, since God himself is Goodness, and there is no counterpart Evil. If this is what we mean, then it is biblical and true; otherwise, we would be affirming dualism, or the view that Good and Evil are two equal or almost equal self-existent eternal powers that fight against each other. From this perspective, it is correct to deny evil an ontological status in itself.

However, this is not inconsistent with my position. In fact, it is consistent only with mine. That only Good has ontological status means that Good must be the cause of all things, and therefore it must be "good" that there is evil (although evil is not good in itself). This is just another way of saying that God was good and righteous when he actively decreed that there should be evil, and then proceeded to actively carry out this decree.

As I have shown in my books and articles, there is no biblical or rational problem with this; on the other hand, any other view would have a hard time explaining evil, and thus must relegate it to "mystery," or end in dualism.

## 15. Arguing by Intuition

Gregory E. Ganssle recently published a book entitled *Thinking about God*.<sup>50</sup> In one chapter, he explains freedom and determinism, and concludes by stating that he favors "libertarian free will." Note how he argues:

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.<sup>51</sup>

This is terrible, terrible! I feel dirty just for typing it. There are numerous falsehoods and fallacies in these two paragraphs,<sup>52</sup> but I will first focus on only those words that are relevant to our topic, which is intuition.

Note the words that I have put in italics above. If we were to debate the issue of human freedom, or Calvinism vs. Arminianism, is Ganssle going to 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"! Well, *he* is convinced of the premises that *seems* 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 (instead of a non-essential part of your presentation, such as in a mere illustration), you have departed from the realm of strict rational argumentation. Also, you have just lost the right to forbid your opponent from using exactly the type of same arguments, and to him it "seems like" that you are wrong.

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<sup>50</sup> Gregory E. Ganssle, *Thinking About God* (InterVarsity Press, 2004).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136-137, emphasis added.

<sup>52</sup> I have already addressed all of them in my books and articles. The relevant works include, *Systematic Theology*, *Ultimate Questions*, *Presuppositional Confrontations*, *Apologetics in Conversation*, *Commentary on Ephesians*, *The Sermon on the Mount*, "The Problem of Evil," and "Professional Morons."

When it comes to Calvinism vs. Arminianism, you may have heard something like, "If God is absolutely sovereign, then he controls even our decisions, and in this sense we do not have freedom or free will, but we sense (we are convinced, we feel, we think, it seems like, etc.) that we do have freedom or free will in our daily activities; therefore, Calvinism must be wrong." My response is that I sense or intuit, or it seems to me, that this person is an idiot; therefore, he is an idiot.<sup>53</sup>

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 or intuit that he is an idiot, then I can just as readily tell him that he does not really sense or intuit freedom. That is, if he can claim to know what is really going on in my mind, then I can just as readily claim to know what is really going on in his mind.

Ganssle is claiming to know what we all intuit. Among other things, 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 constructs his claims upon an objective and infallible foundation, then if he can claim to know what I intuitively affirm in my own mind, why can't I also claim to know what he intuitively affirms in his mind? In fact, I deny that I intuit any of the three items above. Thus I affirm that "we are convinced" that he is wrong, and that he "seems to be" quite confused and arbitrary. Unless he stops arguing by intuition as he does, he cannot with consistency reject my claims.

So the whole thing amounts to purely subjective nonsense.

When debating Arminians, or when reading their literature, you will notice that many of them base many of their crucial premises on intuition, and often on intuition alone. Ganssle's pattern of argument is very common with them – they just assume that their needed premises are true because *to them* they *seem to be* true. They say that they are *convinced* that these premises are true (often they say that we are *all* convinced), and then they proceed on that basis. 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. At least in these instances, their ultimate standard of truth and morality is not God's revelation but their own intuition. Their "seems like" *seems* unquestionable to them.

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<sup>53</sup> Why am I being hard toward this kind of thinking? It is because it is an irrational kind of thinking, and one that is often used to assert heretical positions, such as libertarian free will.

However, all the "seems like" could be wrong. To paraphrase Clark, it might be that we think we have free will not because we *know* something (that we have free will), but because we *don't know* something (that we really don't have free will).<sup>54</sup> It might be that some people intuitively think certain things are true because they are ignorant. Luther puts it stronger, saying that we think we have free will because we have been deceived by Satan.<sup>55</sup> In any case, the debate cannot be settled by intuition alone.

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 sensation, those who are less stupid realize that they cannot derive anything from sensation. Thus some of them turn to intuition, and claim that by it they know certain ethical principles. But other than the problems already mentioned (that intuition is subjective, non-universal, fallible, etc.), why must we obey intuition?

It is most unfortunate that many Reformed/Calvinistic writers also appeal to intuition to construct their arguments and their systems. When they do this, it is often because they are trying to assert some of the very same ideas and premises that the Arminians and the atheists affirm, such as unbiblical concepts of freedom and justice. But since these false premises cannot really be derived from biblical revelation, and since we can derive nothing at all from sensation, they take refuge in intuition. However, as we have shown, this is to banish themselves to subjectivism and irrelevance, and when Reformed/Calvinistic writers do this, they are being inconsistent with their otherwise biblical and rational theology.

One example is William G. T. Shedd. Although he is to be highly commended for being one of the least empirical among theologians, he fails to depend solely on divine revelation. Rather, appeals to intuition pervade his *Dogmatic Theology*, and he does this to establish premises and principles that in fact only Arminians should affirm, and that only Arminians need, such as a version of free will and an unbiblical basis for moral accountability.

As Reformed/Calvinistic Christians – as Christians whose views on God, man, and salvation are truly biblical – we must not and need not appeal to sensation or intuition, which can only lead to irrationalism and self-contradictory skepticism. Rather, we must cling to God's written revelation, which alone comes from *Logos*, the Reason of God, and which alone can save us and those who hear us.

I originally planned to address only the problems with basing one's arguments on intuition. The quote from Ganssle has provided us with a good example. However, in it he also brings up several points that are not directly connected with intuition, but are nevertheless problematic. It would be instructive to discuss them also.

We will first turn our attention to the following statements, already quoted at the beginning:

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<sup>54</sup> See Gordon Clark, *Predestination*.

<sup>55</sup> See Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*.

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.<sup>56</sup>

First, let us acknowledge that Ganssle is not trying to construct a detailed case for his position in this portion of his book; it represents only a summary of his reasons for his position on freedom. However, this does not prevent us from criticizing what he has written, since he provides enough information here to tell us what kind of arguments he considers as valid rational support for his position.

Unless he completely changes the direction of his whole presentation, then even if given the time and space to elaborate, he would still argue his case using the same type of arguments. That is, even if given the time and space, he could give us only a more detailed version of the same fallacious thinking.<sup>57</sup>

In order to treat his points in some detail, we will deal with each of these statements individually.

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

This statement is so ambiguous that it is hard to know what to do with it. In particular, the crucial expression, "up to" is undefined.<sup>58</sup> Depending on what he means, the expression can refer to anything from a volitional freedom relative to other creatures or a volitional freedom relative to God himself, which is absolute freedom.

It appears that the language and context demand the latter interpretation. For one's action to be "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. That is, if one's action is "up to" himself, then it is not determined by God.

But if any action is not determined by God, then Ganssle is no longer talking about the God of the Bible. At this point, I must refer you to my previous works for detailed explanations on divine sovereignty.<sup>59</sup> In any case, the expression "up to" remains ambiguous.

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<sup>56</sup> Ganssle, p. 137.

<sup>57</sup> Just before I put the following criticisms into writing, I carefully checked his book again, and paid special attention to the chapter in which these statements appear. Ganssle does try to provide more details and arguments in the prior pages. However, nothing that he says can serve to fend off the criticisms below. Readers who wish to verify this can check p. 129-137 of his book.

<sup>58</sup> I am aware that he tries to define (or rather illustrate) it on page 135, but his explanation fails to clarify the concept. On the same page, he admits, "Now, *up-to-me-ness* is not a very precise concept."

<sup>59</sup> See *Systematic Theology, Ultimate Questions, Commentary on Ephesians*, and "The Problem of Evil." Also see, *Predestination and God and Evil* by Gordon Clark.

*"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." Of course, my first reaction is, WHY? Even if we could understand his statement, we have no reason to believe it. But as we will see, it is not that easy to understand the statement.

Before we even know what he means by "up to," he now suggests that there are degrees of "up to"-ness. So, according to him, an action can be "up to" a person to a greater or lesser degree, but how he knows that, he does not explain.

Then, 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*." But even if we swallow the suggestion that there are degrees of "up to"-ness, how high is "high enough," and how does he know?

Also, if the "up to"-ness must be high enough to be "reasonable," what does he mean by "reasonable"? By *reason-able*," 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? How does he know?

Or would we be completely unjustified in suspecting that by "reasonable," he is once again appealing to some intuitive standard that he cannot objectively project and support outside of his own mind, and in which case his intuition would once again take the place of God?

So why must the "up to"-ness reach a certain degree before it is "high enough" to be considered "reasonable" to hold someone responsible? This point remains unanswered.

Also, what does he mean by "responsible"? I will not even try to guess.

Now, since he contrasts the "up to"-ness of one's action against "determinism,"<sup>60</sup> and since the "up to"-ness can be of a greater or lesser degree, it follows that the "determinism" must also be in degrees – that is, it is not absolute, but relative.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> That is, if something is "up to" God, then it is not "up to" us.

<sup>61</sup> That is, if something is "up to" us, then it is not "up to" God. And since Ganssle contends that some or many things are "up to" us, it follows that some or many things are not "up to" God. Therefore, unless "determinism" is absolute and comprehensive, it is just another word for an "up to"-ness similar to ours, even if it is greater in degree or more frequent in instances.

But this puts the God who is the subject of "determinism" in a similar position with the creatures who are the objects of "determinism." That is, some things are "up to" (determined by) him, but some things are not. He might be more powerful than we, so that more things are "up to" him than "up to" us, but it remains that when it comes to "up to"-ness and determinism, he differs from us only in degree and not in kind.

So again, we have lost the God of the Bible.

In contrast, the biblical position is that we are "morally responsible" in the sense that we are morally accountable to God; that is, God will judge us. Our beliefs and actions will have consequences because God will *cause* these consequences.

Moreover, it is "reasonable" for God to hold us morally 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 God is the sole and ultimate moral standard, and he accepts his own decision to hold his creatures morally responsible.

In this explanation, the issue of human freedom does not even enter into the discussion.<sup>62</sup> It is thoroughly consistent with absolute divine determinism, in which God controls all things, including every human thought and decision.

*"Yet we do hold each other morally responsible."*

To understand this statement, and to perceive what is so wrong about it, we need read it in the context of the paragraph. So here it is again:

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 simplify the argument, we may paraphrase it as follows: "If determinism is true, then we are not morally responsible. But we do hold each other morally responsible. Therefore, determinism is false." Even assuming we agree that "we do hold each other morally responsible," Ganssle says nothing to establish that this is in fact the right thing to do. Just because we do something does not mean that it is necessarily the right thing to do. Maybe we are wrong in holding each other morally responsible.

Note that the argument is supposed to show that determinism is false, and not to merely make sense of holding each other morally responsible. That is, the function of the argument is not just 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

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<sup>62</sup> There is no logical place for human freedom to enter the discussion; it has to be arbitrarily introduced by force.

the premise "we do hold each other morally responsible," and on the assumption that this is the right thing to do (or that this premise should be held constant).

As it stands, the best that this argument can do is to *explain* why Ganssle would *want* determinism to be false! He wants determinism to be false because he wants to explain why we hold each other morally responsible. In other words, according to this argument, in order to justify what we do (whether what we do is right or not), we must reject determinism (whether determinism is in fact true or not). The argument is purely pragmatic, not rational.

Besides failing to establish that we *should* hold each other morally responsible in the first place, we have already pointed out that Ganssle also fails to establish the previous premises, especially the one claiming that if an action is not "up to" us, then we are not morally responsible for it. Thus what he intends to be a rational explanation for affirming "libertarian free will" turns out to be incomprehensible chaos.

In contrast, the biblical position is that *God* has revealed his moral laws to us, and he has declared that he will hold us accountable according to those laws. Then, 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 absolute and perfect accountability may be rendered by God when he judges humanity. Rather than basing our arguments on intuition or even common practice (as Ganssle does), our foundation for moral responsibility is divine revelation.

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

What I have said above already covers this last statement. Here I will approach the argument from a slightly different angle.

Now, the argument amounts to saying:

1. If determinism is true, then we are not morally responsible.<sup>63</sup>
2. But we do hold each other morally responsible.
3. Therefore, *determinism is false*.

The problem is that the conclusion is *not* a necessary inference from the premises. Even if we were to use the same premises, we could come to a very different conclusion:

1. If determinism is true, then we are not morally responsible.<sup>64</sup>
2. But we do hold each other morally responsible.
3. Therefore, *we are wrong in holding each other morally responsible*.

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<sup>63</sup> Remember that Ganssle fails to justify this statement, and we do not accept it. But this is what he asserts.

<sup>64</sup> Again, we deny this, but this is what Ganssle asserts without justification.

Ganssle's version of the argument refuses to compromise the practice of holding each other morally responsible, whereas second version of the argument refuses to compromise determinism. Both versions of the argument are fallacious, since the conclusions are not derived from the premises by necessary inference. Moreover, Ganssle provides no justification for the first premise, and it is a premise that I reject.

We have finished examining the paragraph, but we are not yet done with Ganssle, since he goes on to say:

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.<sup>65</sup>

We have so thoroughly dissected his way of thinking that by now you should be able to see what's wrong with the above statements without much help. So we will briefly summarize the problems without going into the details.

We note that the whole paragraph again tries to merely make sense of what we supposedly do, without justifying that we should do it in the first place.

He says, "*We are convinced* that our deliberation has a real effect on the outcome." But who is he to speak for all of us? In fact, I am not convinced of this statement at all. In any case, *even if* we are all convinced of this statement, the question remains, "But is it true?" As it is, the foundation of his premise is mere subjective intuition, or even mere popular opinion. Adding to this that the term "real effect" is ambiguous, the whole statement is unintelligible.

Then, he says, "The decision we come to, upon deliberating, *seems to be* up to us." Again, he is resting this premise upon intuition alone. Just because something *seems* a certain way to us does not mean that it is really true. But we have already discussed the fallacy of appealing to intuition, so we will move on.

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! The argument intends to establish libertarian free will, and to do that he claims that only libertarian free will can make sense of deliberation. But 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 at all.

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<sup>65</sup> Ganssle, p. 137.

He claims that "libertarian freedom is the better concept of freedom," but whether this is true or not is irrelevant at this point, since he fails to establish libertarian freedom, or for that matter, any kind of freedom.

Nevertheless, I might agree with him on something after all, for he ends the paragraph by saying, "compatibilist freedom is no freedom at all." Now, as he explains earlier in the chapter, by "compatibilist freedom" he means "determined but free."<sup>66</sup> He states that this is a popular concept of freedom, but one that he opposes. Here he adds that it is "no freedom at all."<sup>67</sup>

But it appears to him that the only remaining option is to accept libertarian freedom; however, this is not true. What if we deny *both* libertarian and compatibilist freedom, and affirm an absolute and comprehensive divine determinism?

I understand that even many Reformed/Calvinistic writers would object to this; instead, they feel compelled to affirm compatibilist freedom. This is at least partly because they assume that man must have some kind of freedom in order to be justly held accountable. But this is just an assumption, impossible to prove, and contradicted by Scripture.

Of course, we must be careful to define "freedom" in an accurate and relevant way. We must at least answer the question, "Free from what?" Now, when we are speaking of divine determinism, the "determiner" is God. So in this context, 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 assert that man is free from God in some sense, you have lost the God of the Bible.

A consistent Reformed/Calvinistic/Scriptural position would be as follows. Absolute divine determinism is true; therefore, man has no freedom *at all* relative to God – he is not free from God in any sense. However, he is still morally responsible and accountable because God holds him morally responsible and accountable. There is no logical reason to bring in the issue of freedom at all. The premise, "responsibility presupposes freedom," is completely arbitrary, unbiblical, and impossible to prove. Rather, Scripture teaches that responsibility presupposes divine *judgment*, and divine judgment presupposes God's decision to judge. It has *nothing* to do with whether or not man is free.

In fact, since human responsibility presupposes divine judgment, and since divine judgment presupposes divine sovereignty (God's right and power to judge), it follows that human responsibility presupposes divine sovereignty, and not human freedom. We are morally responsible precisely because God is sovereign and we are *not* free.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>67</sup> I agree with him in the sense that, I affirm that if an action is completely 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 these two are in fact compatible invariably define determinism in a manner that God in fact does not determine *everything*, in which case it is not the determinism that I am talking about; or, they would forget that we are considering a kind of freedom that is relative to God (being free *from God*), in which case the freedom being considered is irrelevant.

The question then becomes whether or not this is just – that is, whether it is just to hold someone accountable who is not free. However, this is just the same question rephrased. The issue of justice appears to be relevant only because one has already illegitimately and arbitrarily brought freedom into the discussion. But we answer that this is just because it is what God has decided to do, and he is the sole and ultimate standard of justice; therefore, this is just by definition.

This position is biblical and coherent, and there is nothing inherently contradictory or impossible about it. Many people might not like it because it contradicts their intuition of freedom, responsibility, and justice; however, theirs is a *sinful* intuition. In appealing to their intuition, they have ignored the noetic effects of sin. In chiding them for placing their trust in their own intuition, I do not then turn to assert my own intuition as true; rather, I appeal to divine revelation alone, and if we are going to speak of intuition at all, we must look to revelation to judge our intuition.

We have contended that intuition cannot provide a reliable foundation for our arguments, citing Ganssle's book as an example. Although we have concluded the main part of our discussion on the subject, there is still a related topic that we need to address in order to further our understanding and to avoid confusion. I have in mind our innate knowledge of God and its relationship to intuition and revelation.

Scripture teaches that every person has an innate knowledge of God in the sense that he knows about God and his attributes by instinct, or by intuition, apart from observation and experience. This knowledge resides in man's mind because God has directly imparted it to him as a creature made in the divine image.

Presuppositional apologists often mention this fact; however, when they do so, are they not appealing to intuition? We need to think about this with care. We did *not* say that even the bare *mention* of intuition renders one's case fallacious; rather, we said only that it is fallacious to appeal to intuition as the *foundation* of one's arguments, or to appeal to intuition to derive the premises of our arguments. There might still be a place for our innate knowledge of God in a biblical and coherent system of theology.

In the case of presuppositionalism, biblically and rationally formulated, our innate knowledge of God is not established by intuition itself, but by revelation. We do *not* say, "I have an intuitive knowledge of God; therefore, I indeed have an intuitive knowledge of God," and then leap from that to saying, "Therefore, my intuitive knowledge of God 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, "God's revelation tells me that my intuitive knowledge of God is true in itself, or as far as it goes; therefore, my intuitive knowledge of God is true in itself, or as far as it goes."

Then, we must 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 in itself, this intuition is nevertheless unreliable as a source of knowledge or justification for my premises in reasoning, because I cannot clearly perceive and accurately represent the information contained in this intuition. Rather, if I am to know anything about it at all, I need God's revelation to tell me what this intuitive knowledge contains."

So when we talk about our intuitive knowledge of God, we are talking about a claim made by revelation *about* intuition. It is not a claim by intuition about intuition, and still less a claim made by intuition about revelation. In other words, when we mention our innate knowledge of God, we are not trying to prove God's revelation by our intuition; rather, we are just stating what God's revelation tells us that we know by intuition. Again, this knowledge has been suppressed and distorted by sin, but we know even this only by revelation. Therefore, when we talk about intuition, and specifically our intuitive knowledge of God, it is for an entirely different purpose than the one that we have been opposing. In no instance do we make intuition the foundation of our arguments; instead, we depend solely on divine revelation.

As biblical presuppositionalists, we begin by revelation, and from it we deduce all the necessary propositions within our worldview; there is never any dependence on intuition. When we mention intuition, we do so in the context of saying that God's revelation tells us that every person knows God by intuition, and this explains why they cannot logically or morally excuse themselves. We do not *begin* by saying that everyone knows God by intuition, and therefore 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 on the authority of God's revelation (not intuition), there is no excuse for unbelief.

Moreover, our claim is stronger than just saying that the knowledge of God is intuitively inescapable; instead, our claim is that, positively, the knowledge of God is clear and overwhelming, and negatively, it is logically unavoidable and undeniable.

Thus the criticisms against intuitive arguments do not apply to consistent biblical/presuppositional apologetics. The opponents of Christianity must therefore directly attack revelation. Also, since our criticisms against intuition remain in force, those who would appeal to intuition to support their arguments when attacking Christianity must first prove the reliability of intuition; otherwise, they will have to avoid it altogether. In other words, not only must they directly attack revelation, but they must have something with which to attack it.

## 16. The Problem of Evil

### INTRODUCTION

One of the most popular but overrated objections against Christianity is the so-called "problem of evil." The objection claims that what Christianity affirms about God is logically irreconcilable with the existence of evil. Those who make this objection claim they know for certain that evil exists, and since this is incompatible with the Christian God, then it follows that there is no God, or it at least shows that what Christianity affirms about God is false.

Using the problem of evil, unbelievers have managed to confound more than a few professing Christians, and it seems that many of those who claim to be Christians are themselves disturbed by the existence of evil, or the amount of evil in this world. Some believers manage to provide plausible answers that are not altogether compelling, whereas many others simply call the existence of evil a mystery. However, to the extent that Scripture addresses the topic, so that it is something that has been revealed, Christians have no right to call it a mystery in the sense of something that is hidden. Just because we may not understand everything about the existence of evil does not mean that we must ignore what the Scripture plainly reveals about it.

On the other hand, merely plausible answers are insufficient when the Bible provides an infallible answer and an invincible defense. In what follows, we will see that the existence of evil poses no challenge to the Christian concept of God, or to any aspect of Christianity. Instead, it is the non-Christian worldviews that 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). 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;<sup>68</sup> 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.

Those who use this argument against Christianity may formulate it in different ways, but regardless of the precise form that the argument takes, the point is that Christians cannot affirm all the biblical divine attributes, because to do so would be logically incompatible with the existence of evil. And if this is the case, then Christianity is false.

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<sup>68</sup> Sometimes the argument includes the fact that Christians affirm that God is also omniscient (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; it is one of the most stupid objections that I have ever seen, and even as a child I thought it was a foolish argument. 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 strong emotions effectively disable the minimal level of judgment and intelligence that they normally exhibit.

Now, since the opponents of Christianity claim that the problem of evil is a *logical* argument against Christianity, in response we only need to show that the existence of evil does not *logically* contradict what Christianity teaches about God. Although Scripture also sufficiently answers the emotional aspects of this topic, it is not our responsibility to present and defend these answers within the context of logical debate. In fact, the emotional problems that people have with the existence of evil and their lack of answers to these problems are thoroughly consistent with what Scripture teaches. Thus we will focus on responding to the existence of evil as a logical challenge.

### **FREE WILL**

Many professing Christians favor the "free will defense" in answering the problem of evil. In the context of biblical narratives, this approach states that when God created man, he wanted to grant him free will – a power to make independent decisions, even to rebel against his maker. Of course, God was aware that man would sin, but this is the price of granting man free will. 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 can be blamed only on man himself. Those who use the free will defense would add that the potential or even the actualization of evil is not too high a price for granting man genuine free will.

Although many professing Christians use the free will defense, and to some people the explanation may sound reasonable, it is an irrational and unbiblical theodicy – it fails to answer the problem of evil, and it contradicts Scripture. 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 he did not create the universe and humankind realizing only that they had the potential to become evil; rather, he knew for certain that there would be evil. Thus either directly or indirectly, God created evil.<sup>69</sup>

We may distinguish between natural evil and moral evil – natural evil includes natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods, whereas moral evil refers to the wicked actions that rational creatures commit. Now, even if the free will defense provides a satisfactory explanation for moral evil, it fails to adequately address natural evil. Some Christians

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<sup>69</sup> 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 really 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.

may 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 murder and theft committed by his creatures. Thus God again appears to be the ultimate 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, Scripture 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 (as if anything is inherent apart from God's will), but rather sovereignly imposed by God. Even the seemingly insignificant cannot occur without, not merely the permission, but the active will and decree of God. 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 God's active power and decree (Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 1:3). If we should use the term at all, what we call "natural laws" are only descriptions about how God regularly acts, although he is by no means bound to act in those ways.

Christians must reject the free will defense simply because Scripture rejects free will; rather, Scripture 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 always 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). Free will does not exist – it is a concept assumed by many professing Christians without biblical warrant.

Another popular assumption is that moral ability is the prerequisite of moral responsibility. In other words, the assumption is that 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.

In reference to unbelievers, 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. That is, if a sinner is only a sinner if he has the ability to obey but refuses to obey, since Paul says that the sinner indeed lacks the ability to obey, then it follows that a sinner is not a sinner. However, 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 teaches that he lacks the ability to obey God. This means that man is morally responsible even if he lacks

moral ability; that is, 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 grounded on moral ability or on free will; rather, moral responsibility is grounded on God's sovereignty – man must obey God's commands because God says that man must obey, and whether or not he has the ability to obey is irrelevant.

In the first place, 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 can trace the cause of its movement and direction to factors external to the mind itself, 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 will is still not free, since although these innate dispositions decisively influence the decision, the person himself has not freely chosen these innate dispositions in the first place.

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 made free from God. Scripture teaches that God not only exercises immediate control over man's mind, but God 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.

Therefore, although we may 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. Since the will is never free, we should never use the free will theodicy when addressing the problem of evil.

## **GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY**

Many professing Christians are uncomfortable with the biblical teaching that man has no free will, since it appears to make God "responsible" for the existence and continuation of evil. So in this section, we will provide a brief exposition on what Scripture teaches on the topic, showing that to affirm Scripture is to reject free will.

Scripture teaches that God's will determines everything. Nothing exists or happens without God, not merely permitting, but actively willing 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 controls 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 determines all natural events and human affairs, then it follows that he has also decreed the existence of evil. This is what the Bible explicitly teaches:

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 greatest act of moral evil and injustice in human history is said to have been actively performed by God through secondary agents:

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)

In any case, God decreed the death of Christ for a good reason, namely, the redemption of his elect. Likewise, his decree for the existence of evil is for the worthy purpose of his glory. The elect and reprobates are both created for this reason:

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)

Based on the above passages, we come to the following conclusion. God controls everything that is and everything that happens. There is not one thing that happens that he has not actively decreed – not even a single thought in the mind of man. Since this is true, it follows that God has decreed the existence of evil, he has not merely permitted it, as if anything can originate and happen apart from his will and power. Since we have shown that no creature can make completely independent decisions, evil could never have started without God's active decree, and it cannot continue for one moment longer apart from God's will. God decreed evil ultimately for his own glory, although it is not necessary to know or to state this reason to defend Christianity from the problem of evil.

Those who see that it is impossible to altogether disassociate God from the origination and continuation of evil nevertheless try to distance God from evil by saying that God merely "permits" evil, and that he does not cause any of it. However, since Scripture itself states that God actively decrees everything, and that nothing can 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.

Since "in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28), on a metaphysical level, it is impossible to do anything at all in independence from God. Without him, a person cannot even think or move. How, then, can evil be devised and committed in total independence from him? How can one even think evil apart from God's will and purpose? Instead of trying to "protect" God from something that he does not need protection from, we should happily acknowledge with the Bible that God has actively decreed evil, and then deal with the topic on this basis.

The census of Israel taken by David provides an example of evil decreed by God and performed through secondary agents:

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 the view being presented here is true. God decreed that David would sin by taking the census, but he caused Satan to perform the temptation as a secondary agent.<sup>70</sup> Afterward, God punished David for committing this sin:

David was conscience-stricken after he had counted the fighting men, and he said to the LORD, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done. Now, O LORD, I beg you, take away the guilt of your servant. I have done a very foolish thing." Before David got up the next morning, the word of the LORD had come to Gad the prophet, David's seer: "Go and tell David, 'This is what the LORD says: I am giving you three options. Choose one of them for me to carry out against you.'" So Gad went to David and said to him, "Shall there come upon you three years of famine in your land? Or three months of fleeing from your enemies while they pursue you? Or three days of plague in your land? Now then, think it over and decide how I should answer the one who sent me." David said to Gad, "I am in deep distress. Let us fall into the hands of the LORD, for his mercy is great; but do not let me fall into the hands of men." (2 Samuel 24:10-14)

Although the evil we are speaking of is indeed negative, the ultimate end, which is the glory of God, is positive. God is the only one who possesses intrinsic worth, and if he decides that the existence of evil will ultimately serve to glorify him, then the decree is by definition good and justified. One who thinks that God's glory is not worth the death and suffering of billions of people has too high an opinion of himself and humanity. A creature's worth can only be derived from and given by his creator, and in light of the purpose for which the creator made him. Since God is the sole standard of measurement, if he thinks something is justified, then it is by definition justified. Christians should have no trouble affirming all of this, and those who find it difficult to accept what Scripture explicitly teaches should reconsider their spiritual commitment, to see if they are truly in the faith.

Many people will challenge God's right and justice in decreeing the existence of evil for his own glory and purpose. In discussing divine election, in which God chooses some for salvation and condemns all others, Paul anticipates a similar objection, and writes:

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)

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<sup>70</sup> Satan himself is a creature, and thus has no free will. All his actions and decisions are controlled by God.

In effect, Paul is saying, "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?" Some people object that man is greater than a "lump of clay"; I have even seen one professing Christian writer make this futile objection. First, this is a biblical analogy, and a true Christian will not challenge it. But if one challenges it, then the debate becomes one of biblical infallibility, which must be settled first before returning to this analogy. Since I have established biblical infallibility elsewhere, denying biblical infallibility is not an option here. Second, if man is more than a lump of clay, then God is also more than a potter – he is infinitely greater than a potter. The analogy is proper when we understand it to say what it means, 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).

For a person to have difficulty accepting that God would decree the existence of evil implies that he finds something "wrong" with God making such a decree. However, 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; rather, this higher standard would be God. However, the Christian concept of God refers to the highest being and standard, so there is by definition nothing higher. In other words, if there is something higher than the "God" that a person is arguing against, then this person is not really referring to the Christian God. Since this is the case, there is no standard higher than God to which God himself is accountable and by which God himself is judged. Therefore, it is logically 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 derivative. 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, since 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.

However, 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 the existence of evil. There is no standard of good and evil by which we can denounce his decree as wrong or evil. We are not affirming that evil is good – that would be a contradiction – but we are saying that God's decree for the existence of evil is 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." In other words, there is no one to hold

God accountable, and there is no court to which one may drag him in order to press charges against him. No one judges God; rather, every person is judged by him. Other relevant biblical passages include the following:

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 like saying that good is evil, which is a contradiction.

## THE SOLUTION

Having demolished the popular but irrational and unbiblical free will defense, we will now examine 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.<sup>71</sup>

The argument encounters an insuperable obstacle by the time we reach premise (3), namely, the non-Christian cannot find a definition of love that upholds this premise without destroying the argument. That is, by what definition of love do we know that an all-loving God would want to destroy evil? Or, by what definition of love do we know 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 an argument using a non-biblical definition of love would make the argument irrelevant as a challenge to Christianity. On the other hand, 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 successfully defend premise (3), the argument from the problem of evil fails before we even finish reading it.

Now, if the non-Christian uses a non-biblical definition of love in premise (1), then the argument is a straw man fallacy from the start. But if the non-Christian uses the biblical definition of love in premise (1), and then substitutes a non-biblical definition of love in premise (3), then he commits the fallacy of equivocation. If so, then the most that his argument accomplishes is to point out that he has a non-biblical definition of love, but it would be completely 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, Scripture itself would have to define love in a way that requires God to destroy evil, or to have already destroyed evil. However, although Scripture teaches that God is loving, it also teaches that there is evil in this world, and that this evil is ultimately under God's complete and sovereign control. Therefore, Scripture itself denies that there is any contradiction between the love of God and the existence of evil.

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 Scripture itself does not affirm this premise, and if the non-Christian tries to argue for this premise with definitions of love and evil found in his own non-biblical worldview, then all he succeeds in showing is that the biblical worldview is different from the non-

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<sup>71</sup> Of course, different people may present different formulations of the problem of evil, but my refutation will apply to all of them.

biblical worldview. We already know this, but what has become of the problem of evil? The non-Christian points to the scriptural teaching about God's love, then smuggles in a non-biblical definition of love that requires 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 might be only challenging what the Bible does *not* say, which makes the objection irrelevant. The non-Christian must demonstrate why God's love *necessarily* implies that he must or that he desires to destroy evil, or that it *necessarily* implies that he must have or that he desires to have already destroyed evil.

To answer with something like, "Because a loving God would want to relieve suffering," does not help at all, since it only restates the premise in different words, so that 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 Christianity.

Another type of answer may say, "Because God would want to triumph over evil." Again, what is the definition of "triumph"? If God himself is the ultimate cause of evil, and if God exercises total and constant control over it, then in what sense is he *ever* "losing" to evil? So 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.

Rather, since the Bible teaches about both the love of God and the reality of suffering, it is legitimate to conclude that, from the biblical perspective, the love of God does not necessarily imply that he must destroy evil, or that he must have already destroyed it. Of course this may not be so from the non-biblical perspective, but again, this only shows that the biblical worldview disagrees with non-biblical worldviews, which we already know, and which is the reason for debate. But the non-Christian still has not given us a real and intelligible objection.

As long as the non-Christian fails to establish premise (3), that the love of God contradicts the existence of evil, the Christian is under no obligation to take seriously the problem of evil as an argument against Christianity. In fact, since the non-Christian fails to define some of the key terms, logically no one can even understand the argument – there is no argument, and there is no real objection to answer.

If we stop here, we will have already refuted the so-called problem of evil, having shown that there is no such problem at all. However, just so the discussion can continue, we will grant the premise for now; that is, for the sake of argument, we will assume that the love

of God *somehow* contradicts the existence of evil, while keeping in mind that this is something that Scripture never teaches, and that non-Christians have never established.

Now, the non-Christian argues that given the existence of evil, the Christian God cannot logically exist. In response, we have already shown that the non-Christian cannot establish the premise that an all-loving God must necessarily destroy evil or desire to destroy evil. Having said that, we now proceed to point out that the premises of the argument do not *necessarily* lead to the non-Christian's conclusion in the first place; rather, 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.*

Without immediately stating whether or not we think the above two arguments are valid or invalid, the point is that 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 by no means *necessarily* and *inevitably* lead to the conclusion. Therefore, the argument from the problem of evil is invalid.

Instead of using the reality of evil to deny the existence of God, the two revised versions above come to two different conclusions. Again, I have not said whether these two revised versions are good arguments, and I have not said that the premises necessarily and inevitably lead to these two conclusions; rather, all I am trying to show is that the premises do not necessarily and inevitably lead to the non-Christian's conclusion, and this is enough to show that his argument is invalid.

Some non-Christians say that if Christians claims that God has a good purpose for evil, then Christians must also state and defend this purpose. However, the non-Christians have never been able to show *why* the Christians must state and defend this purpose. The debate is about whether the given 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 and defend this purpose, is completely irrelevant. As it is, Scripture indeed explains at least part of God's purpose for evil, but again, it is not logically necessarily or relevant to the debate.

There is more. Now, the non-Christian argues that God does not exist because evil exists, and by this point we have already refuted the argument. However, we can add that the

existence of the Christian God is in fact the logical prerequisite for the existence of evil. That is, evil is meaningless and undefined without an objective and absolute standard of right and wrong, good and evil, and this standard can only be the Christian God.

When the non-Christian states that evil exists, what does he mean by "evil"? He may be referring to greed, hate, murder, rape, earthquakes, floods and the like. 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 that he gives without appealing to the Christian God and the Christian Scripture will be unsuccessful and easily defeated.

For example, if the non-Christian claims that murder is wrong because it violates the right to life of the victim, we only need to ask why the victim has any right to life? Who gives him this so-called right? The non-Christian? 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 foolish and unjustified.<sup>72</sup>

On the other hand, the Christian affirms that murder is wrong, immoral, and evil because God forbids murder: "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); God explicitly disallows it when he says, "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13). It is consistent with the Christian worldview to say 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 *authoritatively* define murder.<sup>73</sup>

The non-Christian claims that evil exists, and from that basis 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 that we somehow know this standard, so that we 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, his references to evil are meaningless and unintelligible, and his argument from the problem of evil has no effect against Christianity. In fact, on the basis of his worldview, he does not even know what his own argument means.

If a person denies the existence of God, he has no rational basis to affirm the existence of evil; by logical necessity, our recognition of God precedes our recognition of evil. Unless the Christian God is presupposed, evil remains undefined. When the non-Christian argues against Christianity using the problem of evil, he becomes an intellectual terrorist, so that he hijacks the moral absolute of Christianity in the process of arguing against Christianity. However, he cannot refer to any natural or moral evil without implicitly

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<sup>72</sup> For more information, please see my writings on apologetics and ethics.

<sup>73</sup> For example, the non-Christian can never justify defining murder to include the killing of humans but exclude the killing of bacteria. Of course, some advocates of animal rights consider it murder to slaughter animals, but not bacteria; however, they can never justify the inclusion of animals or the exclusion of bacteria.

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 at this point; rather, he will probably try to offer some workable definition of evil to rescue his argument. I cannot list all the possible definitions that he may try to propose, but I have provided enough information here so that anyone can refute any non-Christian definition proposed. If the Christian will consistently demand justification for the non-Christian's claims and definitions, he will always successfully frustrate any attempt to construct an argument against Christianity from the existence of evil.<sup>74</sup>

Some non-Christians have come to realize that the argument from the problem of evil is not strictly valid, so that although they continue to challenge Christianity based on the existence of evil, they have "softened" their claim. That is, 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 the probability of God's existence. Thus instead of calling their argument a logical case against God's existence, they call it an evidential case against God's existence.<sup>75</sup>

But this is nonsense – it is just a deceptive way of saying that they have no argument. In fact, all the problems that I have pointed out with 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 matters worse by adding the concept of "evidence" to the debate, since now I demand at least 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 any 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. But again, what is evidence? And who decides what is "gratuitous"?<sup>76</sup> By what standard of necessity do we

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<sup>74</sup> The argument will ultimately become a broad presuppositional debate. For more information on this, see my *Presuppositional Confrontations*.

<sup>75</sup> Some people use different terms to make this same distinction.

<sup>76</sup> On this point, even some professional philosophers stoop to an appeal of popular opinion. That is, they claim that "everybody knows" that certain things are evil, and that certain things are gratuitous evil. In another context, these same philosophers would probably blast such an appeal to popular opinion to establish a pivotal premise -- that they resort to this tactic here shows me 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

decide that an evil event is unnecessary? And unnecessary for what? And why does it have to be necessary in the first place? In the biblical worldview, when God does something, it is justified by definition just because he has decided to do it. Thus the non-Christian cannot argue against Christianity by appealing to "unjustified" events, since he must first refute Christianity before he can show that these events are unjustified.

## **OTHER WORLDVIEWS**

There is no reason for lengthy explanations or needless repetitions, since the matter is indeed as simple as it appears. The argument from the problem of evil *in any form* is one of the most irrational arguments ever devised, 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 take the offensive position on this topic against the non-Christian.

Perhaps because the problem of evil is most often used to challenge Christianity, many people forget to consider whether non-Christian worldviews and religions have 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 questions.

Next time a non-Christian challenges you with the problem of evil, instead of being pressed into a corner, you should be able to give an irrefutable answer, but then you should take the offensive and turn the argument against the non-Christian (2 Corinthians 10:5):

"I am able to show 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 the Christian God. This God decreed 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 this decree as wrong. One day he will banish all sinners to

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decrees 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, and thus the focus of the debate shifts to a presuppositional one (see my *Presuppositional Confrontations*).

Moreover, even if the appeal to popular opinion is legitimate (although I deny this), 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 already refuted empiricism elsewhere. 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.

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 thus justly punish all sinners who have not trusted Christ for salvation, but his chosen ones will surely be saved.

"But how do you deal with evil? 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 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 it? 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?

"If you cannot give adequate answers to these and thousands of other questions on the basis of your worldview and intellectual commitments without self-contradiction, then it is evident that the existence of evil means the destruction of your worldview, whereas it poses no threat at all to mine. You are a hypocrite for even mentioning the problem as an objection to Christianity"

Although many people are fond of challenging Christians with the problem of evil, the truth is that Christianity is the only worldview in which the existence of evil does not create a logical problem. Nevertheless, many professing Christians are intimidated by non-Christian arguments. This is partly because they have not learned the logical refutations to these arguments, but also because they sometimes partly agree with the non-Christians, at least on the emotional level. But of course, just because something causes an emotional disturbance in some people does nothing to challenge the Christian faith itself.

Now, if the non-Christian is so disturbed over the existence of evil he can always ask a Christian on how to depend on Christ for salvation; otherwise he can commit himself to a psychiatric ward where he may remain miserable under professional care. As for Christians, Scripture provides the solution: "You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you" (Isaiah 26:3). 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 accepting the Christian worldview can a person come to a rational position about 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 sufficiently understand the reality of evil and retain emotional stability. 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.

## **17. 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." Briefly, 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 has 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 24:27)...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 they believe 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 confessional masterpieces 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 boldly 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 is to be admired for how it 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 and accurate. 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 the 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. To keep this article from becoming much too lengthy, 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 also 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 *perfector* 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, but 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. After reading the previous sections, you should be readily able to see their relevance and application. However, if you do not know how some of these passages relate to the doctrine, or if you would like additional information on some of them, then you should consult the standard Reformed commentaries for assistance.

**Psalms 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.

**Psalms 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.

**Psalms 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. Now, 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 exactly 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 completely 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 and of the Reformation, since they reject free will from the beginning, 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. The Christian may sin all he wants, and yet 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**

Although each of the previous sections could be further developed, what has been said is enough to give us a reliable summary on the Reformed doctrine of the preservation of the saints, and we conclude that it is in fact identical to what Scripture teaches on the subject. It is both biblically accurate and theologically consistent.

This doctrine 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 Reformed doctrine of the preservation of the saints – that is, the biblical doctrine – provides the true people of God a strong and infallible source of comfort and assurance. It warns them against false professions and self-deceptions, 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. However, a detailed discussion on this topic, as well as other related topics (such as church membership and discipline) will have to wait until another time.

## 18. Freewill Offerings and Human Freedom

Against a statement like, "Nowhere does the Bible say that man has free will," there are people who answer by saying that the Bible mentions "freewill offerings" in a number of places, and from this observation 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.)

This is one of the strangest objections against the denial of free will, and although I have known about it for years, I have never given a written response to it. This is because it is so silly that I feel embarrassed to even mention it, and to take it seriously enough to write about it. Nevertheless, I am occasionally asked about this by Christians who do not know how best to answer the objection, and I have responded in private to them. And since I have been asked about it at least twice in recent months, I am guessing that more people have difficulty with this question than I thought, and so I have decided to share my answer here.

The objection seizes upon the common English term, but here ends the similarity between the topic (of divine sovereignty and human freedom) and the verses usually cited. 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."

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. To be specific, the question is 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 necessary 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 necessarily 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 that even comes close to God's absolute control over my thoughts and actions. But this does not mean that I have "free will," since again, in our context, we are talking about our relationship with God, and not with other creatures.

Here is where 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? But responsibility in fact does not presuppose freedom, and more than that, responsibility presupposes the opposite of freedom. We are responsible to God precisely because we are not free from God. This confusion, I suppose, is also one of the reasons why some Calvinists fail to discern the sophistry inherent in the objection that I am addressing here. 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 metaphysical human freedom. But 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 in fact two different subjects of discussion.

There are passages that teach the same 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* – that is, Ananias did not have to sell the property or give the money *to them*. But 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 only that he had the right, or the freedom if you must, to withhold the property or the money from *other people*, and that from a legal or moral perspective, not a metaphysical one. Peter is certainly not saying that Ananias could have kept the property or money *from God* in a metaphysical sense! But 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." Aha! Paul says that Philemon has free will!

But 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." The freedom is relative to Paul. The verse refers to the *social* relationship between two creatures, *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 this matter of 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. But if, as Scripture teaches, God's control over man is so immediate and exhaustive so 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.

But I have said all of this before, so I will just end with my usual doxology: God is sovereign and man is not free. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

## 19. 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 dangerously close 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 surrounding circumstances, and thus "inducing" them to "freely" think and act in ways that are in accordance to God's plans.

But many of these Calvinists also realize that this explanation of God's "control" over the decisions and actions of man is in fact 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 will just admit the self-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 also follows that my answer to the objection is different. Instead, 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. And since I have already extensively explained and defended the biblical teaching of divine sovereignty elsewhere,<sup>77</sup> I am not going to repeat all of that here. What follows will be an application of what I have already written about divine sovereignty to the above objection.

We begin by noting that the objection is incomplete. It fails to specify what exactly it is about robots and puppets that would make them relevant. Why would we be like robots and puppets if God indeed determines all our thoughts and actions? What would be the similarities? Then, the statement fails to even become an actual objection by neglecting to note why it would be a problem for us to be robots and puppets. Would it mean that Christianity is false 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 prove or even mention this.

We must not allow our opponents to get away with making lazy and half-baked objections. They assume that they understand the issues and that their objections are

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<sup>77</sup> See Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology, Commentary on Ephesians, The Author of Sin, and Ultimate Questions*.

unanswerable. One of the things that we must do in defending the faith is to show that our opponents are not nearly as intelligent and careful as they think, so that rather than challenging the teachings of Scripture, they ought to humble themselves before the wisdom of God.

The competent apologist should be able to show that no objection against biblical revelation ever makes any sense. After showing that the opponent fails to issue a challenge that demands an answer, since the challenge itself is unintelligible and the opponent himself never knows what he is really asking, the apologist can then address the topic from a position of knowledge and authority.<sup>78</sup> That is, we answer objections not because our beliefs are so apparently problematic that we must awkwardly put out fires left and right, but we first humiliate the spiritual rebels, showing that they speak nonsense even in their protests, and now we pronounce to these defeated foes what God is saying to them through the Scriptures – to repent and believe the truth.

It is always possible to neutralize any objection against Christianity before we even begin to answer it. After showing that the objection is careless and incomplete, we will now proceed to address the topic anyway, but not because the objection logically compels us, since it has already been neutralized.

First, the fact that God controls all of our thoughts and actions does not make us robots and puppets, because even when completely controlled by God, humans are very different from robots and puppets. Humans have minds – they reason, decide, and emote. In fact, since our identities are preserved even when we are disembodied, it is more accurate to say that humans *are* minds that live in bodies.<sup>79</sup> 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* correlating the two. Nevertheless, we are still different from robots and puppets, since they have no thoughts at all. Their physical movements are not occasioned by their own thoughts, since they have none, but by the thoughts of those who use their hands and instruments to control them. And it is in fact 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. That is, 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 (in this case, he causes the finger to move).<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> See Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions, Presuppositional Confrontations, and Apologetics in Conversation*.

<sup>79</sup> Peter refers to the body as a "tent" that could be "put aside" (2 Peter 1:13–14; also 2 Corinthians 5:4). See also "The Ching Ming Festival" in Vincent Cheung, *Doctrine and Obedience*.

<sup>80</sup> For an explanation of the metaphysics assumed here, please see Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions and Captive to Reason*.

Remember that the objection does not explain why it is a problem for humans to be robots and puppets, and this is one reason why it fails before we even answer it. So we are pointing out the differences that humans have against robots and puppets not because the objection compels us, but because we are addressing the topic in spite of the objection. The differences are there to be noted, so that even if humans are completely 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. Given these assumptions, the objector *rightly* 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 humans are not morally responsible if God controls all things, 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 dispense with a less important problem with this reasoning, and that is the unnecessary analogy of controlled humans to robots and puppets. This step could be skipped altogether and the objection would still be intact; in fact, it would be clearer without the analogy. In other words, it would be simpler to just say, "If God controls all things, then humans are not free. But since moral responsibility presupposes human freedom, this necessarily means that if God controls all things, then humans are not morally responsible. But then, since it is necessary to affirm that humans are morally responsible, we must therefore deny that God controls all things."

The process of reasoning is sound in itself, so that the conclusion would be correct *if* all the assumptions were true. However, not all the assumptions are correct, and therefore the objection crumbles. The fatal error is in assuming 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 possible ways to justify it, they would often just say that it is intuitively known and then move on.

But as I have repeatedly stated elsewhere, the assumption is false. By definition, "responsibility" refers to accountability. In other words, for one to be morally *responsible* means that he is morally *accountable* to some person or standard. The issue of whether this person is free is irrelevant to the discussion. 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 even enter the discussion.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, the only reason to affirm that humans are morally responsible is because of this same reason in the first place – that is, that God has decided to judge all of humanity.

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<sup>81</sup> I have discussed this extensively and repeatedly in my other writings. Please see Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology, Commentary on Ephesians*, and *The Author of Sin*.

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 so pleases. Jesus cursed a fig tree for failing to bear fruit. The tree was not free, or even conscious, but it was punished, and Jesus was fully justified for doing it. Of course, the tree and the curse were symbolic, but the symbolic (what is apparent, on the surface) cannot contradict that which is symbolized, or the one would not really be symbolic of the other. The fact is that, whatever deeper meaning is intended, the tree failed to bear fruit, and Jesus cursed it for this reason. Likewise, if God so pleases, he could destroy a robot for malfunctioning, and since he is the sole standard of morality, he would be righteous by definition for doing so. He certainly does not need our permission or to satisfy our false assumptions.

In other words, 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. The objector would expect 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 affirm popular Calvinism will also try to affirm God's total sovereignty at the same time.<sup>82</sup> This plays right into the objector's expectation – it exposes the fact that the position of these Calvinists is indeed incoherent and paradoxical, and that it is affirmed by sheer force, as even the major Calvinistic theologians admit.<sup>83</sup>

However, if we would cast aside the usual unbiblical and irrational assumptions, we would confront the objection by claiming the very opposite. The objection fails to apply not because its analogy denies freedom to man, but because it concedes *far too little*

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<sup>82</sup> Even "total" (or equivalent terms) has become relative for some of those who affirm popular Calvinism. They would affirm God's "total" sovereignty against those who challenge them, but then they would turn around and challenge me for affirming God's "total" sovereignty and its application to metaphysics, epistemology, and soteriology. They (these "Calvinists") would even begin their objections against me by saying, "But if God controls everything..." indicating that they do not really believe that God controls everything (for example, see section I of "Short Answers to Several Criticisms" in Vincent Cheung, *Captive to Reason*). The truth is that they do not believe in God's *total* sovereignty – they just believe a stronger version of God's crippled sovereignty than the Arminians.

<sup>83</sup> See "Forced to Believe" in Vincent Cheung, *The Author of Sin*, in which I use A. A. Hodge as an example of this incoherent Calvinism. 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*." I respond, "Biblical doctrines are inconceivable only if measured against some irrational premise or standard. What we need to do is to cast aside these false principles and assumptions that are not part of the biblical worldview in the first place. But if you are going to take principles and assumptions from two contradictory worldviews and try to jam them together, then, yes, you are going to end up with something inconceivable. Just don't call that Christianity or Calvinism."

control to God.<sup>84</sup> Certainly, God has *infinitely more* control over us than we have over robots and puppets.

With 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 then 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 even then he is not limited to these, but he can change them at any time if he so 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).

In the light of Scripture's testimony, it is an abominable insult to God's majesty and power to assert 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.<sup>85</sup> Of course humans are greater than robots and puppets, as we have already acknowledged. But then, God is *far* greater than humans.

This leads us to a discussion about a related objection against divine sovereignty. However, this time the objection is not based on an extra-biblical analogy, but a direct attack against Scripture. The passage is in Romans 9, and it is enough to cite only verses 18–21:

<sup>18</sup>Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden. <sup>19</sup>One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" <sup>20</sup>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?'" <sup>21</sup>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?

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 God cannot be resisted, then humans should not be blamed. In other words, like many non-Christians, Arminians, and inconsistent Calvinists, it adopts the unbiblical

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<sup>84</sup> See "Determinism vs. Fatalism" in Vincent Cheung, *The Author of Sin*, in which I respond to the charge that my position on divine sovereignty amounts to fatalism by noting that fatalism is in fact *weaker* than the biblical determinism that I affirm – it ascribes *too little* control to God over his creation.

<sup>85</sup> As the following discussion of Romans 9 would imply, 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 infinite control over his creation. The error, therefore, is not in using an analogy to illustrate God's control, but it is in asserting or implying that the analogy *fully* represents God's power.

assumption that responsibility presupposes freedom. We have already addressed this false premise.

This other objection that I have in mind, related to the one about robots and puppets, attacks the analogy in verse 21. I have come across it in the writings of liberal theologians who reject the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, and also in conversation with several professing Christians. That is, 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 of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?"<sup>86</sup> Against this, they exclaim, "But surely we are more than clay and pottery!"

In other words, 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 an absolutely sovereign God, one who can directly act on the mind to cause both good and evil. The challenge is directed at not only Calvinism, but Scripture itself. In reply, we will offer the following points.

First, the attack against verse 21 neglects the point that Paul is asserting. 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 truth of Paul's 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, and this is related to the first, although Paul could point out that the objection falsely assumes that responsibility presupposes freedom, he does not explicitly do it here. However, he achieves the same effect by answering the objection from the perspective of divine rights versus human rights. The objection goes, "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 (see v. 22). But you have no right to talk back." This reply, of course, is contrary to popular Calvinism, which would tend to say, "God has the right to show mercy to whomever he chooses, but he merely passes by the reprobates, who have damned themselves." Instead, 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.

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<sup>86</sup> As a side note, 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, instead, Paul says, "God *makes* the noble vessels *and* the common vessels out of *the same* lump of clay." Thus this passage offers definite support to unconditional active reprobation and 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*.

Third, perhaps blinded by a humanistic indignation that man has been reduced to clay and pottery, 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!

Now, an analogy is an analogy, and a successful one only needs to accurately make its intended point. Scripture is perfect, and Paul's inspired 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 does not intend to represent every aspect of the objects that it illustrates. By pointing this out, the objection seeks to protect human freedom. However, we cannot relax the analogy for one object without also doing the same for the other objects in the same analogy; otherwise, there would be a tremendous distortion between the relationship of these objects. So, if we must break away from the analogy to consider the true nature of man, then God must also break away from the analogy so that we can consider his true majesty and power.

Contrary to their expectation, once we relax the analogy, the situation becomes even less favorable for our opponents. Rather than preserving any human freedom, the full sovereignty of God is exposed, and all the limitations imposed upon the "potter" by the analogy are now lifted. And for the same reason already 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. God is sovereign and man is not free. Blessed be the name of the Lord. Without hesitation or qualification, we can boldly proclaim, "Our God reigns!"

## 20. Jeremiah 32:35

Yesterday I saw this from a Christian forum:

Now, if you're so convinced that the most Holy God is ultimately behind all sin and evil, care to 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 biblical 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.

In response, first we reaffirm the biblical distinction between divine decree and divine precept. As I have explained and defended this elsewhere, I will offer only a summary here. 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 the commands of God. The verse is completely irrelevant to whether God decrees or causes evil. This 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. In fact, if God had commanded it as their moral obligation, it would have been a righteous thing to do.

I have answered this objection against the biblical doctrine, but this person is left with a serious 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 would 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. Now, 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 were to adopt the false idea that foreknowledge is mere prescience, or a passive knowledge of future events, this concept of 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 – that he is incapable of hypothetical thought. But clearly to cause evil is conceivable to him (he can grasp the concept), since according to this interpretation, he interacts with the idea in this verse. This interpretation should alarm believers and invite great suspicion 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 spiritually speaking, 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.