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Re: Response to a letter dated June 1, 1993 (All Calvary Chapel Pastors)

Dear Brother in Christ:

This also is a difficult letter and has taken over two years to write. I also pray for your hearing and your understanding.¹ I may disagree with you but I do not consider you a divider of the brethren because you hold to the beliefs of Hyper Calvinism. I want to make this very clear that I am not in disagreement with Calvinism for "Armenian" reasons. It is a common myth that if your not a Calvinist, you must be an Armenian. I do not believe that these are the only Evangelical or Orthodox options. I appreciate the writings of John Calvin and James Arminius but the Word of God is the standard and final authority.

PREFACE

Let me begin by Quoting you:

"Doctrines such as the total depravity of man, the unconditional election of God's elect to salvation, the aspects of irresistible grace, the efficacy of the atonement, and the perseverance of the saints are anything but heretical. Potentially difficult to accept yes,² heresy, no. They were the stronghold of the Christian faith, and the convictions of the Church since its inception. To label them as not Scriptural and as heresy is to take nearly every sincere Bible scholar in history and to associate him with the enemies of the cross. People such as Martin Luther, John Owen, John Calvin, Joseph Alleine, John Bunyan, Thomas A. Kempis, Aquinas, Augustine, Henry Thornwell, William Gurnall, Richard Sibbs, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Charles Spurgeon and Martin Lloyd-Jones all professed these biblical truths. Are they heretics? How foolish and vain to condemn such men as these!"

My statement is this, doctrines such as the total depravity of man, the unconditional election of God's elect to salvation, the aspects of irresistible grace, the efficacy of the atonement, and the perseverance of the saints were opposed by some fine Bible believing saints and scholars.

¹ 2 Corinthians 2:4.

² "Potentially difficult to accept yes." Is that ever an understatement.

People such as:

G. Campbell Morgan, John Wesley, J.B. Lightfoot, D.L. Moody, Charles Finney, F.B. Meyer, C.S. Lewis, A.T. Robertson, Henry C. Thiessen, Marvin R. Vincent, Robert Coleman. Norman Geisler, James Arminius, and R.A. Torrey all opposed the teaching of Calvinism. Are they heretics? How foolish and vain to condemn such men as these.

Sound familiar? This type of argument gets us know where. What are we left to do? I hope your answer is look at the Word of God and not the word of man.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of Calvinism shows up in one form or another in the pulpit, the horoscope columns, learned theological and philosophical treatises, primitive superstition, and the bitter questionings of countless people who simply can make no sense of their circumstances. It goes by various names in its various forms: predestination, determinism, foreordination, fate, destiny, necessity, the laws of nature, the sovereign will of God, providence.

By any name, it's a foregone confusion. The terms are not terribly important, but the issue raised is. And whether a believer attributes everything that happens to God's sovereign control or a non-believer attributes them to some anonymous cosmic force, the issue is basically the same. So let's avoid getting bogged down in theological jargon and pose the issue instead as a question: Does God normally determine, cause, and control people's behavior and circumstances? ³

You can show biblically that He does, but you can also show biblically that He does not. Where one's personal belief falls on the spectrum between the two opposites is a matter of degrees and emphasis. Some people emphasize those Bible passages that seem to say that everything is ultimately God's doing (Proverbs 16:4).⁴ Others are unable to reconcile that idea with the assumption of Scripture that people are responsible for what they do because their behavior is not God's doing, but their own (1 Corinthians 7:37).⁵

These two lines of truth seem to run parallel in the Bible: one, that God has

³ By normally I mean routinely, as standard operating procedure in the overwhelming majority of cases; God's practice, variations from which are exceptional. By people I mean everybody: Christians, non-Christians, atheists, believers in other religions. By behavior I mean all the things people do, intentionally or not; mental and physical acts they perform, decisions leading to outward acts, and things people say. By circumstances I mean any situation, constraint, event, anything that happens to people, the web of consequences of things people decide and do.

⁴ Proverbs 16:4, 9; Matt. 20:16; 22:14; John 6:44; 10:26; 15:16; Acts 13:48; Rom.9:10-13,16; 9:17-18; 9:19-23; Ephesians 1:4-5,11; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; Rev. 17:8.

⁵ 1 Samuel 12:14,15,24; 2 Kings 20:4-5; Joshua 24:20; Psalms 106:44-45; Isaiah 1:18-20; Isaiah 41:21; Jeremiah 18:8,10; 26:2-3; 29:9,11,12; 42:10-12; Joel 2:13-14; Jonah 3:10; Micah 6:2,8; Acts 17:30; 1 Cor. 7:37; 2 Tim. 2:12; 2 Peter 3:9; Rev. 20:13

chosen His “elect” from eternity, and two, that these “elect” have made a responsible decision to trust Christ. “All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me (***that’s divine election***), and the one who come to Me (***that’s human responsibility***) I will certainly not cast out” (John 6:37). No Bible writer seems to consider the two contradictory, for they both appear within the same books and sometimes side by side. It therefore seems safe to say that the problem lies not in the Scripture itself, but in our interpretation of it.

Though no Bible writer attempts to reconcile the two apparently contradictory lines of thought, other writers have. The most common attempt at reconciliation is simply to say, in effect, “God does control everything you do, yet you are free to do what you want. It’s a mystery.” The contradiction between the two statements is not, however, resolved by dangling the word *yet* between them. Lacking a clear resolution, the wisest course seems to be to go with the position that makes the most sense, seems most pervasive scripturally, and squares with people’s real-world experience.

Most evangelical Christian’s would agree that salvation is made possible because of the atoning death of Jesus Christ. The biblical testimony is clear that humanity is totally unable to save itself. The new birth is one-hundred percent a work of the Spirit of God, as John 1:12-13 makes clear. How the salvation is applied to the individual persons, however, has been a matter of considerable controversy throughout history of Christian thought.

Christians through the ages agree that salvation comes as a person hears the message about Jesus and responds to that message with a saving faith. Two things are necessary: A person must hear the gospel and must respond to that message by putting his or her trust in Jesus.

It is clear from Scripture as well as experience that not all who hear the objective message respond with faith. Yet some do. And so throughout church history some theologians have struggled with the question, “Why do some reject Jesus and others accept him?”

The biblical use of the word *call* helped to focus this agreement during the Reformation. The Protestant Reformers noted that while at times the word *call* is used to indicate an objective presentation of the gospel itself (as in “many are called but few are chosen”), at other times the word *call* seems to indicate God’s special work that guarantees a positive response to the message (Romans 8:30). Theologians in the Reformed tradition then explained what happens when a person believes this way: God acted within the person to confirm the truth of the gospel message, influencing him or her (without force) to be willing to believe. Those who reject the gospel and choose not to believe, hear the external call to faith, but that external call is not accompanied by the Spirit’s inner call, which is necessary to influence the free choice to believe.

This particular view of how God and human beings interact in coming to faith in Christ is not the only view we find in church history, and it is closely linked with the Reformers' belief in predestination.

What are some of the other views? We can see various ideas about what happens when we look at a hypothetical situation. Both Mike and Ron heard the gospel regularly, not only as children in their churches but also as adults through reading, radio, TV, and the testimony of friends. Mike responded to the gospel message and accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior.

Ron simply continued to shake his head and refused to believe. What kinds of explanations have been suggested in church history to explain their opposite responses to the same objective presentation of the gospel?

Viewpoint	Mike	Ron
Pelagian	Mike willed to believe.	Ron willed to reject.
Semipelagian	Mike began to try to believe and was helped.	Ron made no effort to believe.
Arminian	Mike cooperated with the grace God gives all people.	Ron did not cooperate.
Lutheran	Mike yielded to God's grace.	Ron continually resisted God's grace.
Calvinist	Mike was given new life by God's Spirit and so chose to believe.	Ron was not given new life by God's Spirit and so was not able to believe.

Disagreements are not new. At the time of Christ, the Pharisees were, according to Josephus, "material predestinationists, the Essenes absolute predestinations, and the Sadducees hostile to all forms of predestination, since they traced all events to chance. Material predestination limits the divine decree to this material life ... to the effect that a man does not hurt his finger in this world unless it has been decreed."⁶ Some of the greatest minds of theology and philosophy have wrestled with the issues and have reached no consensus. Nor are we likely to settle the question forever here.

As a result of the dilemma, most Christians settle for a wishy-washy, poorly-thought-out compromise between the two poles, figuring the truth must lie somewhere in the middle. Martin Luther, however, wrote, "I will not accept or tolerate that moderate middle way ... to allow a certain little to free will, in order to remove the contradictions of Scripture and the aforementioned difficulties. The case is not bettered, nor anything gained by this middle way. Therefore, we must go to extremes, deny free will altogether and ascribe everything to God!"⁷

⁶ Hastings, James: The Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, "Predestination" p. 231.

⁷ Erasmus-Luther: Discourse on Free Will, p.132-133.

I agree with Luther that there is no happy medium between the two positions, and I do believe God would prefer that we be hot or cold rather than lukewarm. But I am going to argue the opposite of Luther. If we are bound to err on the question no matter what we believe, I will err on the side of autonomy.

I'm going to use Luther's position as a benchmark and argue against his extreme, not because many people would agree with it if you asked them, but because it represents the implications of the poor theological reasoning many people do use. Much of what follows will sound like it was written by an atheist. And yet my purpose is not to indict God, but rather the opposite: to challenge a concept that I believe *does* indict God, by tracing out what its implications would be if what Calvinism says were true.

PREDESTINATION AND ELECTION IN CALVINISM

Calvinism is a major Protestant theological tradition, represented by Reformed and Presbyterian churches. Calvinism emphasizes both the sovereignty of God and human ruin by sin. A Christian understanding of God must begin with the recognition that he truly is God, in total control of all events in the universe. God has planned the whole from the Creation itself, and his power guarantees that his every purpose will be realized. In it all, God made his choices freely, moved only by his love and his grace and not at all affected by the choices that he foresaw human beings would make. The fact that salvation rests completely on God's action in carrying out his purpose is demonstrated by the Bible's teaching on sin. Adam's fall ruined the race, making it impossible for any human being to choose to obey or respond to God. Human choices are made freely, but sin has so warped human beings that free choices of unsaved persons will never seek God. Thus both the sovereignty of God and depravity of humanity make it clear that an active work of God, changing people within so that they will choose to believe and thus be saved, is utterly necessary. Predestination is the simple confession that personal salvation is a result of God's purpose and of his action in us.

It is important to note that while God chooses those destined for salvation and acts to move them to an irresistible faith, he does not predestine the unsaved in the same sense. That is, God does not actively choose those who will be lost for damnation, nor does God act to move them to unbelief. His activity is focused on salvation. It is only human sinfulness and unwillingness to respond to God that results in condemnation.

PREDISTINATION AND ELECTION IN WESLEYANISM

Wesleyanism, represented by historic Methodism and Wesleyan Methodist churches, reflects an Arminian position. God is sovereign, and his purposes will be worked out in our universe. But while God knew from eternity the people who would be saved, he did not predestine them in the active, irresistible, Calvinistic sense. Instead God provided humanity sufficient grace that, despite the impact

of sin, any person may choose to respond to the gospel. It follows that sin has not had a drastic an impact on human beings as is supposed by Calvinists. Although the person's free will must be exercised in cooperation with God's grace, the choice of the individual neither initiates nor merits salvation. Salvation is still completely by grace. God has been able to structure all things in the universe according to his plan, not because he acts to make some believe but because he knew from the beginning who would choose to believe.

FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY

People often divide the will of God into two or three separate wills. The terminology varies, but basically the idea is that God has His *moral* will, which He hopes everyone will obey (such as tell the truth, feed the poor, and so forth). His *individual* will is what He wants you in particular to do (such as go to this school, buy that house, or marry this person). His *sovereign* will is what absolutely determines everything that everybody ever did and ever will do, no matter what. It is irresistible and absolute.

Dividing God's will up into two or three wills raises a troubling question. The moral and individual wills, sometimes lumped together as God's desired will, are diametrically antithetical to God's sovereign will, both in concept and in content. This is how.

In concept, the desired will assumes that we are active and autonomous: that God in one way or another communicates to us what He wants us to do, and that we then autonomously decide whether or not to obey. The sovereign will, however, assumes that we are passive: God does *not* bother telling us what He wants us to do, but just sovereignly causes us to do it whether we consent or not. I may choose to do or not do God's desired will, but I have no choice about doing His sovereign will.

In content, any given act is automatically within the sovereign will but may be entirely contrary to the desired. Having an extramarital affair, for instance, is clearly against God's desired will. Yet if we do it, then it was by definition within His sovereign will. In fact, whatever anybody does is within His sovereign will. In fact, whatever anybody does is God's (sovereign) will, simply by virtue of the fact that they did it.

If God does have these contradictory wills, then He is commanding us to do one thing while causing us to do the opposite. He wants us to tell the truth, but supposedly causes us to lie. He wants us to love our neighbors, but causes us to grab all we can get for ourselves at our neighbors' expense. How is it conceivable that He would cause people to do the very things He prohibits? Obedience would then be the most meaningless concept in the Bible. How can we call something God's "will" if it decrees that we do things He clearly does not want us to do? At a deeper level, if God's wills are antithetical to one another,

then is He not defeating His own purpose? Do we have a schizophrenic God?

Theologians who argue that God controls everything are always quick to add the disclaimer, “This, of course, does not exclude human responsibility” The argument is that, even though God initiated the person’s behavior, that behavior is perfectly consistent with the person’s own character. Since the heart of a person is “deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked” (Jer. 17:9), then evil deeds are consistent with that evil heart. And God has every right to hold the person responsible for the behavior even though God Himself initiated it.

Taking a cue from Romans, these theologians argue that people are incapable of choosing to do good, only evil, so whatever one does can accrue to one’s blame but never to one’s credit. If you weren’t already an evil person, you wouldn’t be doing all these evil things that our holy God is causing you to do. Martin Luther put it this way:

“Since God moves and works all in all, He necessarily moves and works even in Satan and wicked man. But he works according to what they are and what He finds them to be, i.e., since they are perverted and evil, being carried along by that motion of Divine Omnipotence, they cannot but do what is perverse and evil. When God works in and by evil man, evil deeds result. Yet God cannot do evil Himself, for He is good. He uses evil instruments, which cannot escape the sway and motion of His Omnipotence. The fault which accounts for evil being done when God moves to action lies in these instruments which God does not allow to lie idle. We are subject to God’s working by mere passive necessity. He cannot but do evil by our evil instrumentality, although He makes good use of this evil for His own glory and for our salvation.”⁸

That is a terribly short-sighted concept. The idea that God works according to “what He finds them to be” looks at the immediate situation as though it were God’s first involvement with the person—which contradicts the idea that He “works all in all.” Where was God in all that person’s previous life? Has the sinner been independently developing bad habits in obscurity, forgotten and neglected by a God who now suddenly “finds” the sinner and picks up on his or her own wickedness to carry out His holy/evil plan?

If everything is God’s doing, then were not all the sinner’s prior sinful acts—which have been ever reinforcing and hardening his or her wickedness—likewise God’s doing? The person may have had a starter dose of sinfulness, as do we all, but hasn’t his or her daily development into major-league sinner been under the guidance and control of the God who makes everything happen?

If Luther is right, then God is not merely *allowing* us to do the evil things we do, but actively *causing* us to do them. That implication is revolting, but is also inescapable *if* God in fact determines, causes, and controls people’s behavior

⁸ Erasmus-Luther: Discourse on Free Will, p. 130.

and circumstances. For God (or even other people) to blame you for doing the evil things God causes you to do would be absurd as blaming you for something you did in my dream.

IMPLICATIONS

Let's suppose that God does in fact normally determine, cause, and control people's behavior and circumstances. What are the implications?

If it is a fact, then it is the only absolute fact in human affairs. No other teaching or doctrine means anything independently or makes sense independently. God's all-inclusive control covers everything else and settles all arguments. It's not really true that I scratched my nose; God made me scratch it. I did not really marry my wife; God put us together. To believe heart and soul in divine control is to have exactly one belief.

If we are robots we are machines, if we are totally programmed and pushed around by God, if we are nothing but passive victims whose destinies and alternatives are determined and limited by heredity and environment, then morality makes no sense at all. You don't preach morality to machines. You don't praise or blame people for their behavior if they had no choice in the matter. The simplest proof that the human will is free to choose is this: if we are not free to choose, then all our ordinary language about morality is totally meaningless. Every sentence with words in it like *should*, *ought*, *shouldn't*, *right*, *wrong*, *good*, *evil*, *obligation*, *guilt*, *innocence*, -even "repent" -are meaningless. You don't say "Please pass the sugar" to a machine. If you have a sugar-passing machine, you just push its button and it passes you the sugar. If people are like machines, then the only way to talk to them or treat them is by force, by pushing buttons. The consequence of denying free will and seeing people as machines to be properly programmed is totalitarian dictatorship and slavery.

There would be no reason to vote, since God would install His candidate anyway. No reason to donate blood, pay your bills, feed your kids, or loan your neighbor a cup of sugar. It would be meaningless to arrest criminals, care for the sick, preach, read or write books, study Scripture, tithe, or pray. If God wanted those things done, He'd get them done. It wouldn't even matter whether we believed in Jesus or not, because if God wanted us to believe, He would do the believing through us.

If God determines, causes, and controls our circumstances, then He must determine, cause, and control all the decisions and actions that produce those circumstances. Since circumstances overlap, involve any number of people, and consist of both good things and bad things done by believers and non-believers alike, God would have to utterly control everything everybody does.

A friend of mine (a Calvinist) says that God causes each event as precisely the

strategic element He needs to accomplish His purposes. So, for instance, in September 1983, He had an inconceivably complex web of specific things He wanted to accomplish in the lives of thousands upon thousands of people all over the world. One strategic event could accomplish all of those purposes simultaneously: having a Soviet pilot shoot down a certain Korean commercial airliner carrying a certain divinely-selected set of 269 passengers and crew members. God arranged for each one to be on that plane. He arranged for the Soviet pilot to shoot. All the decisions everyone involved thought they were making were in fact under God's control. Their deaths and the heartbreak branching outward in the lives of their families and friends were all precisely the purpose God had in mind when He cleverly caused this one critical event to happen.

Does that sound as fishy to you as it does to me? Quite apart from the goodness or badness of the situation, such total control is indistinguishable from zero control. God could be dead and all the same consequences would ensue from that event. One could as easily credit a stone with having caused it to accomplish the stone's inscrutable purposes. The victims would have every right to ask, "Why me?" though they would of course never get an answer. We would be within inches of a very pagan superstition of gods amusing themselves at our expense.

To say that God determined, caused, and controlled the destruction of that airliner is a classic example of circular reasoning: in the absence of evidence, it can be one's conclusion only if it was one's premise in the first place.

If God controls, then either we do not possess a genuine faculty to think our own thoughts, make our own decisions, and take our own actions; or, if we do possess such a faculty, God constantly overrules it. Martin Luther seemed to favor the former: "Free will is an empty phrase, and God works in us both good and evil, and all that comes to pass is of mere necessity"⁹

Either prospect is bleak. If we have no faculty to decide and act autonomously, then we are marionettes indeed.¹⁰ If we do have that faculty but God constantly overrides it, then we are like a horse forever carted about in a trailer behind a truck, never to run, its very nature suspended and wasted.

In either case, nothing we do could be described as sinful or righteous, wise or foolish, because nothing we-Christians or non-Christians-do would be more or less than God's doing through us. Whatever brand of evil you care to abhor most would be morally equivalent to whatever brand of virtue you care to honor because all that too would be God's doing. Christ's ministry and death would be

⁹ Erasmus-Luther: *Discourse on Free Will*, p. 123.

¹⁰ Eric Fromm writes, "The opposite of education is manipulation, which is based on the absence of faith in the growth of potentialities ... There is no need of faith in the robot, since there is no life in it either" (*The Art of Loving*, p. 104-105).

irrelevant. There would be no hope, only the next round of busywork God orders up. No meaning to life, only the flawless mechanical execution of His preordained plan. No behavior-only function, with no possibility of malfunction. Your measure of willingness to “do the will of God” would be irrelevant, because God would be carrying out His will through you whether you consent or not. You in fact would not even have the option of not cooperating: your very non-cooperation would itself be God’s doing.

If God controls everything, then He is creating the very misery, the very evil, we Christians are supposed to apply the fruit of His Spirit to alleviate. We are to feed the poor whom He has impoverished, visit the prisoners whom He has stricken. Dig a hole and fill it up. He is then like the nurse convicted in Texas in 1984 for injecting children with a drug that brought them to the edge of death so she could look like a hero by saving their lives.¹¹

On another level, of course, why should we lift a finger to help anyone whose affliction is God’s doing? Wouldn’t that be interfering with His sovereign plan? How dare we call the Samaritan “good” who interfered by helping a man beaten by people under God’s control?

HOW CAN GOD ALLOW EVIL?

A short digression about God and evil seems unavoidable. One of the classic philosophical questions poses the dilemma: How can an all-loving, all-powerful God allow evil? That comes very close to being a profound question. But it’s the wrong question.

The question assumes that bad things happen independently of the bad things people do. What is God’s alternative to “allowing” people to fight wars, for example? Jam all the guns? Suspend the laws of physics so the missiles don’t take off? Silence all the politicians and paralyze all the generals? Revoke the capacity of everyone involved to make decisions? God doesn’t exert that kind of control.

Moral or human evil came from God’s choice to make beings who had the freedom to reject His love. First, to be evil is to be out of fellowship with God. To do evil is to violate the love of God, self, and others. Second, God created humans with the potential to break relationship with Him. Third, God is ultimately responsible for moral evil.

I didn’t say God is evil, or that He made evil. I said that evil’s existence is God’s responsibility. We must never forget that when we argue with God about our own suffering or that of others. God has been there. Dorothy L. Sayers said it this way:

¹¹ The Death *Shift*,” by Peter Elkind, *Texas Monthly*, August 1983, p. 106

“God chose to make man as he is—limited and suffering and subject to sorrow and death. He [God] had the honesty and courage to take his own medicine. Whatever game he is playing with his creation, he has kept his own rules and played fair... He has himself gone through the whole human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair, and death. When he was a man, he played the man. He was born in poverty and died in disgrace and thought it well worthwhile.”¹²

The Cross shows that God is no stranger to pain. God does not allow us to go through what He Himself avoids. He came face-to-face with evil in this world when He came among us in the person of Jesus. The Cross can never be separated from the Resurrection. It points steadily, at the midpoint of time, to that ultimate victory over pain at the end of all time. Because of the Cross and the Resurrection we can be sure that God will not ultimately be defeated by evil and suffering, and neither will His followers.

It is people who are capable of blithely committing unspeakable atrocities: stacking slaves in shiploads like spoons in a drawer, torturing children in front of their parents—take your pick of human horrors. As long as we’re talking about things people decide and do, though, there’s no philosophical/theological dilemma (except perhaps why people can do such utterly wicked things).

Of course, God allows people to do what they do. But that doesn’t tell us anything useful. *Allow* is a meaningless word in terms of God’s role vis-à-vis evil. It’s not wrong, just empty. Nothing at all happens in the universe except by God “allowing” it, whatever that means. *Allow* implies that there is some autonomous agent doing something that God refrains from intervening to prevent. There is a world of difference between allowing things to happen and causing them to happen. We must not start out saying we believe God determines, causes, and controls things that happen and then wind up saying that all we really mean is that He “allows” them to happen. Those are not the same beliefs.

The only way we can reconcile those two contradictory ideas is to say that He sometimes controls and sometimes allows. But if God allows people to do things autonomously *even some of the time*, then that means we do have the capacity to make our own autonomous decisions and actions. He must therefore be overruling that capacity all the rest of the time. He can therefore control circumstances only by doing violence to the nature He Himself created in us.

The right question, the profound one, when we view evil and misery in the world, is not how God can *allow* evil, but whether He causes evil. We instinctively recoil at the very suggestion. But we often routinely talk about all the rotten things God

¹² Dorothy L. Sayers, “The Greatest Drama Ever Staged,” in the *Whimsical Christian* (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1987), p. 12.

is “putting in our path” to get our attention, steer our course, or teach us some lesson. The idea that God causes evil is less a formulated and taught belief than an assumption we just absorb. But if God does determine, cause, and control circumstances, then He must necessarily be the direct and immediate cause of all evil simply because evil is intrinsic to human circumstances. This leads us to further implications.

SO WHAT?

If it really is true that God controls everything that happens, even the evil, then we’re left with the ultimate philosophical question: So what? It’s like being told by a scientist that all our behavior is a mere outworking of evolutionary impulses: so what? The information that God has determined the outcome will not help us make the decisions that produce that outcome. Since we can’t know or predict what God has ordained for a given situation, we can’t do anything one way or the other with the information that He has ordained *something*. We can believe that as fact or not. But in the end it’s useless information because we still have to go through the lonely motions of making each decision.

It’s useless also because God holds us accountable for our own decisions and actions anyway (See Revelations 20:13; Psalms 62:12; Proverbs 24:1-2). We can blame God or shake a fist at Him, but if our very fist-shaking is actually His doing, then life is indeed all vanity of vanities and a striving after wind. Life would be equally meaningless if God caused everything or if there were no God at all.

The extent to which I genuinely view myself as a helpless, passive implement of forces beyond my control is the extent to which I will lead a sappy, wasted life. Fate will always serve as an excuse for inertia and mediocrity.

If the information is at best useless, at worst it scuttles any incentive to obey, believe, pray, or live the Christian life. In his letter to the Ephesians (the very one that begins with the strongest teaching of predestination), Paul found it necessary to “entreat [them] to walk in a manner worthy of [their] calling” (Ephesians 4:1). Why? Because they weren’t! If God’s calling were a causing, then He would be mechanically producing the Christian walk in us. But Paul must entreat God’s elect to stop stealing, lying, being bitter, angry, slanderous, malicious, immoral, greedy, and filthy. The very fact of Paul’s writing must mean that even if God did in some sense predestine you to salvation (Ephesians 1:4-6), He is not necessarily causing your subsequent behavior! You can stifle the Spirit and behave contrary to God’s promptings. But it’s your own doing.

THREE WILLS OF GOD

1. God’s Perfect Will: In His sovereignty, God has expressed that His perfect will is for us to be saved and sanctified (1 Timothy 2:3; 1 Thessalonians 4:3).

2. God's Permissive Will: God's permissive will allows us to choose whom we will serve in this life-God or man (Josh. 24:15; Matthew 6:24).
3. God's participatory will invites us to participate with Him in making decisions and effecting His will in time and space (cf. Ex. 32-33; Isaiah 1:18; Phil. 2:21; 3:7-16).

The Bible says of Israel, "Yes, again and again they tempted God, and **limited** the Holy One of Israel" (Psalm 78:41).

God's will is clearly not always done on the earth, for the Lord told us to pray, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10).

God's will is always done in heaven, but not on the earth. There are many things which take place that are not God's will.

The Bible says, "Such prayer is right, and approved by God our Savior, whose will it is that all men should find salvation" (1 Timothy 2:4 NEB).

The Bible says, "And he (Christ) is the propitiation for our sins, (i.e., the elect), and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2).

The Bible is clear: 'Christ died for everyone'. Yet millions are lost.

Again Jesus said, "'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! **How often I wanted** to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, **but you were not willing**" (Matthew 23:37).

Clearly Christ's will was not done. God was willing, but Israel refused. Many more examples could be given, but these are sufficient for our dialogue and search for truth.

SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD (What God cannot do)

If I say that God does not normally determine, cause, and control people's behavior and circumstances, does that mean I'm saying God is not sovereign? Of course not. It just means that a particular interpretation of His sovereignty is faulty.

Christianity maintains that God is omnipotent. He is the God of creation, the God of the atom, the Maker of life. But let us not mistake the nature of omnipotence. It is not the ability to do everything (however contradictory): it is the ability to achieve purpose (See; Job 42:2; Romans 8:28).

Let us look at the things God cannot do. God will do what is consistent with His nature, character and purpose. There are some things that God *will* not do or even *cannot* do.

1. God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone else to do evil (James 1:13; Job 34:10; Habakkuk 1:13; Psalm 5:4).
2. God cannot lie (Titus 1:1- 3).
3. God cannot deny Himself (2 Timothy 2:1 3).

When it comes to salvation, there are (I believe) three specific things God cannot do.

1. He cannot forgive sin without the penalty being paid.
2. God cannot force a gift upon anyone. Salvation can neither be earned or merited—it can only be received as a gift from God. And the recipient must be willing; the gift cannot be imposed by the giver against the recipient's will.
3. God cannot force anyone to love Him or to accept His love. Force cannot produce love. True love can only come voluntarily from the heart.

All of the Bible descriptions of God's moral nature imply some standard of value to which He has always and will always conform. He has given us nothing He is not first willing to do himself; when He commands us to be holy, it is because He himself is holy (Lev. 20:7).

Jesus always used parables, so let's do the same: What does it mean for a human king to be sovereign? It means that he has the right to set the rules, to tell his own subjects what he wants them to do, and to call them into his service as he pleases. He has the right to their loyalty, time, abilities, and wealth. He also has the right to punish anyone who refuses to cooperate—as they sometimes do. No matter how oppressive and dictatorial any human king may be, he is *never* able to manipulate people except to the extent that they cooperate with him.

God, of course, is not subject to human limitations, so He *can* exercise greater control in a person's life than can a human sovereign. But one of the central points of this paper will be that His working policy is to exercise control only to the extent that a given believer allows Him to. He is a gentleman. For a born-again Christian to *voluntarily* allow Christ to live His life in and through him or her is fundamental to Christianity. But for God to cause anyone and everyone to do things *regardless* of whether they consent or not is rape.

Just as a human king does what he wants he must to preserve his kingdom, so does God. Once, when Jesus was accused of using demonic power to cast out demons, He said, "Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and a house divided against itself falls. And if Satan also is divided against himself, how shall his kingdom stand?" (Luke 11:17-18). Jesus' reasoning is that for Satan to cast out demons is to defeat his own purpose. But the same principle applies to *any*

kingdom, including God's. In fact, the Greek word is *every* kingdom.

If we believe that God determines, causes, and controls everything and that all that has happened in the past was His sovereign will (simply because it happened), then we must include all the things that have had the effect of pushing people away from God. By Jesus' reasoning, for God to cause events calculated to push people away from Himself (and He knows that they will) is to defeat *His* own purpose! If that is the case, then God's kingdom is, according to Jesus, divided against itself, laid waste, and guaranteed to fall. That conclusion, though intolerable, is inevitable if it is true that God controls circumstances.

Jesus goes on to say that, while Satan and God each work to scuttle the other's purpose, neither is stupid enough to defeat his own purpose.¹³ "How can anyone enter the strong man's house and carry off his property, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder his house" (Matthew 12:29). In other words, it's done by an enemy from outside, not an inside job.

If God does defeat His own purposes, then what is Satan for? Satan never enters the discussion of predestination or providence during the sermon; it's always God's hand at work in circumstances. Satan gets dragged in only when we start pondering the implications. We say, in effect, "God causes only the good things; blame the bad things on Satan." Okay, but that means we don't really believe that God causes all things-only some things.

To involve Satan, therefore, is to change the concept radically. No longer is it God's hand doing all the business; now Satan is mucking around in our circumstances too.

Involving Satan obviously makes it much easier to account for the rotten things people do, and thereby takes the heat off God. But we then have an entirely different picture. God's sovereignty suddenly seems chopped in half, since He's having to contend with a rival. In fact, if God is controlling all the good and Satan

¹³ One event that was clearly under God's control was the Crucifixion. Although ordinary people arranged it and carried it out, Isaiah 53:4, 6, 10 and Acts 2:23 make it clear that it was God's idea and God's activity. One lesson from that intervention is unmistakable: God did what *He* had in mind to do, regardless of what any human thought of it. The Jewish leaders and the Romans were not believers and did not seek God's leading in the situation. Whereas Christians are forever praying for God's leading and asking Him to take charge of a situation, there is no suggestion here that God did what He did in response to anything anybody else wanted.

That does not mean, however, that He acted out of some inscrutable, none-of-your-business arbitrariness. Rather, He had a plan and a clearly defined purpose that He announced beforehand through prophets, had Jesus foretell over and over, carried out flawlessly, and explained (through Jesus and the apostles) afterward.

God's intervention in causing the Crucifixion is a far cry from the notion common nowadays of God making anything and everything happen-no matter how antithetical to His stated purposes-just to accrue somehow to His glory in the abstract. On those occasions when God does intervene, He accomplishes His purpose. He never defeats it.

all the bad, then it's arguable that God isn't controlling much.¹⁴ Satan seems to have by far the bigger share of the pie.

As soon as we acknowledge Satan as an active force, we acknowledge that God is not controlling circumstances but rather *competing* with a rival who wins most of the battles (even if not the war). For God to control everything, given a Satan, must mean that God is not just allowing but actively determining, causing, and controlling everything *Satan* does! I doubt anyone besides Luther and possibly John Calvin is prepared to believe that!

The instinctive response to the suggestion that Satan's involvement reduces God's sovereignty, is that God is indeed still sovereign, but that He voluntarily *allows* Satan to operate.¹⁵ In other words, God's sovereignty does not require that He determine, cause, and control everything that happens. He can voluntarily grant liberty-dare I say autonomy?-to an intelligent creature (Satan or a human) *without compromising His own sovereignty*, because His sovereignty means something other than exercising categorical control. He can voluntarily refrain from exercising His own sovereignty to the nth degree.

And, I would submit, that is precisely what He normally does. Free moral choice can take place ideally only in the absence of compulsion. First Corinthians 7:37 gives one of the best pictures of ideal freedom. It is he "who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will." If man is compelled to choose by his own nature or character, by God or by Satan, or by something or somebody else, choice is not truly or ideally free. He still could control and perhaps on occasion does, but He does not have to and normally does not. Rather, He grants to humans the privilege of making their own decisions and taking their own actions—good and bad, wise and foolish—and to live with the consequences. Perhaps the ultimate exercise of His sovereignty is to grant us that privilege. Can I say that again? Perhaps the ultimate exercise of His sovereignty is to grant us that privilege

GOD'S CHARACTER (Can We Trust God?)

Ultimately, the trouble with the idea of God controlling behavior and circumstances is what, if true, it tells us about the nature and character of God. I can love a Lord who stands at the door and knocks, who will come in and sup with anyone who will hear His voice and open the door. But I can only tremble in terror at a God who knocks the door down, barges in, and starts pushing everyone around. If God does in fact determine, cause, and control everything that happens, then there is every good reason to fear Him, but no reason to love or worship Him.

¹⁴ Never mind the problem of defining what's good and what's bad; or what to make of non-moral things and things that are good for some people and bad for others.

¹⁵ Satan's operating is of course within bounds God has established (Job 1:12; 1 Cor. 10:13; Revelations 20:2, 7).

I can even love a God who controls circumstances once in a while, but not one who does so normally. Does that distinction seem strange? An illustration may explain it. My wife and I have two cats. If my wife and I were to move to England from California. What options do I have concerning my two cats if we move? Rather than leaving our cats behind, we would have them sedated, put in a crate, and flown over to England to be with us. Most anyone would recognize this act as an indication of how much we love our cats-because it is exceptional. If, however, we *normally* keep our cats drugged and locked in a crate, that would reveal a despicable cruelty. We'd be arrested if found out.

In much the same way, I can believe that if God intervenes to manipulate people in some extraordinary case to accomplish some purpose of His own, He is still my loving Father. Like the cats, I may not understand it, but I can take the exceptional in the context of His normal loving ways.

If, however, the manipulation *is* His normal way, then I would have to question that He is loving at all. Any given evil manipulation would be just one more instance of His moral ambivalence. Scripture portraying Him as holy, just, righteous, and loving would be mere academic theology unsupported by His track record. ¹⁶

I have heard a number of people say, in effect, "Yes, God does cause people to do some pretty awful things, and, yes, to our finite perspective they look pretty bad. But we just have to have faith that He is loving and that it all works out for the best." That reasoning defies credulity. As Harold Kushner says, "How seriously would we take a person who said, 'I have faith in Adolf Hitler, or in John Dillinger. I can't explain why they did the things they did, but I can't believe they would have done them without a good reason.' Yet people try to justify the deaths and tragedies God [supposedly] inflicts on innocent victims with almost these same words... If a human artist or employer made children suffer so that something immensely impressive or valuable could come to pass, we would put him in prison. Why then should we excuse God for causing such undeserved pain, no matter how wonderful the ultimate result may be" (When Bad Things Happen to Good People, p.19).

If God is supposedly causing people to do all the nasty things they do, what might be His purpose? Perhaps the one most commonly suggested is that it all accrues to His glory somehow. Presumably His glory shines brightest in comparison with the wickedness of people.

That looks pretty good at first glance. But the argument defeats its own purpose because of what it tells us about the character of God. Do we really mean that God will cause your best friend to gossip about you so you'll learn not to put your

¹⁶ Sure, you and I may be comfortably insulated from a lot of nastiness in the world. But the good only complements the bad; it does not cancel it out.

trust in people but in Him? That makes Him less trustworthy than your friend! At best it's like a professional football team playing against school boys to show how good they are. At worst it's like starving guests for a week so they'll appreciate the dinner you fixed for them.

The idea suggests not God's glory by contrast to people's rottenness, but vain glory, perversity, cruelty, and pettiness on God's part. Recognizing that implication, Paul rejects that kind of reasoning and is angry that unbelievers accuse Christians of using it. "If our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? The God who inflicts wrath is not unrighteous, is He?... May it never be! For otherwise how will God judge the world? But if through my lie the truth of God abounded to his glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner? And why not say (as we are slanderously reported and as some affirm that we say), 'Let us do evil that good may come'? Their condemnation is just" (Romans 3:5-8).

ANARCHY

Many people would feel lost without a sense that God was in control of everything that happens. Amid the apparent anarchy in the world, they take great comfort in the idea that our sovereign Lord is actually keeping control of everything according to His perfect plan.

I for one find nothing remotely comforting in that idea. It scares me to death. It is like a squirrel: appealing from a distance, ugly and frightening up close. It is horrifying, because *if it is true*, then this God we always thought was a loving Father is in fact more evil than anybody Nazi Germany produced-because He produced Nazi Germany.

It is one thing to recognize that life is beyond my own total control, or beyond any one human's control. But it is something else entirely to leap to the conclusion that our lives, therefore, *are* under God's control.

Does God have a dark side? Christians have bought into the idea that God is personally responsible for everything bad that happens. When there is an earthquake in California, whose name will appear as the cause of all the damage on the insurance forms? It was "an act of God."

I read an article in a Christian magazine recently about "the dark side of God." The author cited Isaiah 45:7 from the King James Version - "I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things." The author also quoted Proverbs 1 6:4, "The Lord hath made all things for himself: yea, even the wicked for the day of evil." To use these passages to make God an agent of evil borders on blasphemy. Other translations give a different observation. For example, the New International Version translates Proverbs 16:4, "The Lord works out everything for his own ends - even the

wicked for a day of disaster.” I am sure, that it is quite different to say “God overrules evil to bring good” as contrasted with “God has a dark side that fosters evil for His own good purposes.”

You need to know this about God: he has no dark side. The Apostle John states flatly, “God is light; in him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). So much for the supposed “dark side” of God. God does bring good out of evil. He brought salvation for mankind out of the murder of Jesus. That is quite different from saying, however, that God does evil in order to bring about good. Paul condemns that kind of thinking as it applies to us (see Romans 3:8; 6:1-2). We are not to do evil that good may come, and neither does God.

Being God, He of course *could* control everything, but the question is whether He in fact *does*. What we have in the world is at least apparent anarchy: people looking out only for their own advantage, cutthroat business practices, child molesting, church members fighting each other tooth and nail, routine divorce, witchcraft, promotion of homosexuality, people being cheated out of their life savings, families struggling to care for retarded children, cruel employers and police officers, terrorism, parents killing their children, venereal disease, aids, teenage pregnancy-on and on the list goes. There is certainly a bright side, which is far more pleasant to look on. But the bright side only complements the ugliness; it does not neutralize or eliminate it.

The world is, always has been, and always will be little more than a whisker away from anarchy. I’m not advocating it, just recognizing it. Newspapers are perhaps more honest about the situation than are the preachers who say the world only *seems* out of control, that God is really guiding everything along by His perfect plan. The world is quite literally out of control, not because our God is not sovereign or capable of doing anything about it, but because He has chosen to give humans the freedom to do as they please and to reap the consequences of what they sow. And since the human heart is “deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked” (Jeremiah 17:9 KJV), the resulting mess is no surprise to God and should be no surprise to us. *What God is after is people who will be the exceptions to all that.*

God has indeed made the possibility of man’s choosing, including the possibility of choosing wrongly. But God has not made evil. There is not an evil tree and a good tree in the garden of Eden. There is simply choice. When God finished creating there was nothing made which was contrary to His character. For God said everything He made was very good (Genesis 1:31).

Given the state of evil in the world, it makes far more sense to attribute it to random human choices than to accept the idea that God is controlling it all. One’s expectations for people should be far lower than one’s expectations for God.

I can understand people doing moderately mean things to one another, so I can

understand people doing unspeakably horrible things to one another. I may not like it, but at least I can make sense of it.

If, however, I suppose that all the rotten things people do are in fact part of God's perfect and sovereign plan or will, then I would be utterly confused. I would also be terrified, because it's not just that God is allowing it all—He must necessarily be *causing* it all.

If no one is controlling and coordinating people's behavior, then the present situation of apparent anarchy is about what we would expect. If, however, God is controlling, then many of the things the Bible tells us about Him (that He is love, a God of order, unwilling that any should perish, and so on) seem unsupported by the fruits by which we might know Him.

If there were anyone controlling things, the more likely suspect would be Satan, since the fruit is more consistent with his character and goals than with God's. Indeed, Paul calls Satan "the god of this world" (2 Corinthians 4:4; see also John 12:31).

In short, the idea that God directly determines, causes, and controls people's behavior and circumstances raises enormous problems and is anything but good news. If true, it is terrifying news, because it would mean that God is quite literally our most fearsome enemy. Whatever is the worst tragedy, the most grisly evil you can imagine, has happened—and at God's initiative.

FREE WILL AND SIN

The bottom line: My past may severely limit my choices, and it may heavily weight my choices. Sometimes it may leave me no choice at all. But these heavy influences do not rule out freedom as a factor in my history. Sometimes, in fact, my lack of freedom may be traced to the misuse of freedom in my history. A drug addict may be unable to resist taking a drug today because of previous occasions in which he freely chose to take the drug. Real free choices have real consequences, and those consequences may include a loss or diminution of freedom for oneself and others. Yes free choice is inescapable. We are "condemned to freedom" as Sarte put it.

Why the negative language ("condemned")? Because there is something in us that fears freedom. If we are free we are responsible. We can't pass the buck to others and blame our society or our parents.

I believe sin is a kind of bondage or addiction from which one must be delivered. To believe in original sin is to believe that we human beings have collectively so misused our freedom by rebelling against God that we are currently powerless to restore a relationship to God by our own efforts.

It is a serious mistake to view the work of reconciliation and redemption as becoming effective without our participation. This is far from the truth. However, it would also be a serious mistake to say that what Jesus Christ did depends basically on us. This is not the case, for "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:1-9). God has done everything on His part, but you and I must receive it, else we are still in our sin.

WHEN YOU'RE DEAD, ARE YOU DEAD?

The Calvinists believe that because of the total depravity of mankind, they can't respond to God in repentance and faith. It is often said by Calvinists that "dead men can't respond" (Ephesians 2:1). In Romans 6, it says that "in the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus."

What is our role in helping people "see the light"? The answer is to share the good news of the gospel with them. Paul says that this message is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16). We must rely on the Holy Spirit to do what we cannot; Christ assured us that those who were given to Him by the Father would indeed come to Him and be received (John 6:35).

Here is my question: If being dead in sin means one can't respond to God then does being dead to sin in Romans 6 mean that the Christian cannot respond to sin? Does this mean when we become a Christian sin has zero hold on us?

That Satan is given a measure of power in the minds of the unconverted should not discourage us from explaining the gospel to them. No matter how blind or spiritually dead a given individual might be, our confidence is in God's ability to open his or her heart. Whether the gospel is accepted or not, it will always be used by God in some way.

Let us not quickly forget that Adam and Eve sinned against God and became spiritually dead. Yet, when God spoke to them in the garden, they heard Him. I believe people who are dead in trespasses and sins can hear the voice of God.

THOSE SCRIPTURES WHICH TEND TO IMPLY THAT MAN IS FREE

First, Man is called to make a choice. 'But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord' (Josh. 24:15).

- a. Had Israel been incapable of making the right choice, Joshua is mocking them in requiring such a choice.
- b. Elijah assumed the same thing when confronting the prophets of Baal. 'Elijah went before the people and said, "How long will you waver between

two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.” But the people said nothing’ (1 Kings 18:21).

Second, Man is called to repent. ‘In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent’ (Acts 17:30).

- a. Repenting is apparently something we are required to do; otherwise God would not put it to us.
- b. Peter called for this on the Day of Pentecost. ‘Peter replied, “Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 2:38).

Third, Becoming a Christian is the result of being persuaded. ‘Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience’ (2 Cor. 5:11).

- a. The root word in the Greek for faith (pistis) is peitho that means persuasion.
- b. Agrippa could see that Paul was trying to persuade him. ‘Then Agrippa said to Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?”’ (Acts 26:28).

Fourth, Jesus wept over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41) because they should have accepted him but did not. ‘O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing’ (Matt. 23:37).

- a. What was offered to Israel was rightfully theirs.
- b. But it was their steadfast refusal that led to their blindness. ‘All the people answered, “Let his blood be on us and on our children!”’ (Matt. 27:25).

Fifth, If a person is lost it is because he rejected what was on offer to him. ‘But when the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles”’ (Acts 18:6).

- a. The Jews were given the first opportunity to believe.
- b. Their repeated rejection was of their own will. ‘But concerning Israel he says. “All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people”’ (Rom. 10:21).

Since God created mankind in His own image and likeness with the power of choice, I believe that more than anything else, God wanted man to love and to serve Him freely. It grieved God that man chose to believe and serve Satan and sin. But it delights His heart when man's darkened understanding is enlightened perception, chooses to obey the gospel and to declare the righteousness of God.

Freedom consists in the power to choose a course of action in line with what is perceived to be good or in one's best interests. It may involve willing and acting contrary to one's central disposition or nature, and in that case amounts to denying oneself. Jesus said to his disciples and presumably many unsaved people listening, "Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Mark 8:34, KJV); see Matt. 1 6:24; Luke 9:23).

The basic ingredient in freedom is the ability to deny oneself. We *can* choose contrary to our own nature. While choices are ordinarily in line with one's central desire and disposition, these can be denied. Remember that Adam denied his holy nature when he sinned.

If individual choices were determined by the character of the individual, then Adam, created with a holy nature, could not have sinned. And fallen man, with his sin nature, would be incapable of responding to God.

But Adam, we are told, had a two-directional freedom. He was free to obey God or to disobey. Not so if freedom consists of making choices solely in accordance with one's nature. Since Adam was holy by nature, he acted "out of character" and denied himself when he disobeyed God.

Is modern man different than Adam? It is said fallen man has only a one-dimensional freedom. He is free only to sin, and he does that freely because it is in line with and arises out of his sin nature. While insisting that man is free in his sin because he wants to sin, yet it is commonly maintained that such freedom to sin is an enslavement of the will which prohibits a person from turning to God. In Luther's metaphor, man is a beast, both God and Satan want to ride him, and man has no choice as to who sits on his back.

The decision to deny oneself, to choose contrary to nature, is a crisis decision-conversion-involving repentance and faith. Such a decision can be made only through God's enabling grace.

PROBLEMS IN CALVINISM

Arminians reject the Calvinist conception of election because they see in it a God who is partial and unjust. A God who arbitrarily chooses some to eternal life and others to eternal damnation, a morally upright God of the Bible who does not show favoritism (Acts 10:34).

Lets ask this question: "For whom did Christ die? A simple question? Yes, but the answer is most profound. Calvinism maintains that Christ died and shed His blood *only* for those whom God chose to be redeemed. This view, commonly known as John Calvin's "limited atonement," has many supporters. However, John the Apostle tells us that Christ gave His life as a propitiation for our sins. (i.e., the elect), though not for ours *only* but for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2). Some may quibble about passages which emphasize the term "all," even attempting to make it a restricted term, but they cannot evade John's usage of "whole" (Greek *holos*). In the same context the Apostle quite cogently points out that "the whole (*holos*) world lies in wickedness" or, more properly, "in the lap of the wicked one" (1 John 5:19). If we assume that "whole" applies only to the chosen or elect of God, then the "whole" world does not "lie in the power of the wicked one." This, of course, all reject.

It is sometimes argued that Christ's blood was *sufficient* for the sins of the whole world but *efficient* only for those who accept Him. However, the question concerns not the sufficiency or efficiency of the sacrifice but the identity of those for whom it was offered. Semantics may be good for intellectual gymnastics but they are a poor substitute for revelation.

Others attempt to undercut the substitutionary aspects of the atonement by pointing out that while Christ died vicariously, His death was not substitutionary. This they accomplish by redefining the meaning of the word vicarious, so that for them vicarious becomes "one death for the redefining the meaning of the word vicarious, so that for them vicarious becomes "one death for the benefit of all," but not literally *in place of each* individual.

Such thinkers point out that the Greek preposition "*huper*," often translated "for" found 160 times in the New Testament, has, in certain atonement contexts, two separate meanings. It may mean "benefit" or "substitution." They point to such passages as John 15:13, 1 Timothy 2:5, 6, and 1 Peter 3:18, and particularly those selected passages where the preposition Gr. *anti* (which they agree is the stronger of the two words) translated "for," appears 22 times in our New Testament.

If "*anti*" were used, the Calvinist say, instead of "*huper*," the "absolute certainty" of the idea of substitution could never be successfully challenged. They reject, however, a very important aspect of grammar at this point, and we must clarify the issue for all to see.

Let us consider the facts. In speaking of His substitutionary sacrifice, Christ declared, "the Son of Man came to give his life a ransom *for (anti)* many." (Matthew 20:28). At the Last Supper, during which Christ emphasized the vicarious nature of Calvary, He said, "This is my body, which is given *for (anti)* you" (Mark 10:45). The usage of *anti* in such passages as Matthew 5:38, ("An eye *for* an eye"), Luke 11:11 ("will he *for* a fish give him a serpent?"), and

Matthew 2:22 (“Archelaus reigned in the place *of (anti)* his father Herod”) reveals unmistakably that substitution is the indisputable theme and meaning of Christ’s death.

Consequently, both of these words are synonyms *anti* as well as *huper* is used to refer to the vicarious nature of Christ’s atonement. Since the meaning of *huper* must be determined by its context, the two terms are virtually interchangeable in context.

To illustrate this, let us take Paul’s statement in 2 Corinthians 5:20, “Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us, we pray you in Christ’s place (*huper*), be ye reconciled to God; for he has made him who knew no sin to be sin *for us*” (*huperemon*). This alone establishes the interchangeability of *huper* with *anti*. Another instance is Philemon 1 3: “Whom I have retained with me that *in thy place (huper)* he might have ministered unto me.” That *huper* in these instances means “in place of” is undeniable.

Another statement of the Apostle Paul, “The love of Christ constrains us, because we thus judge that if one died *for all (huper)*, then all died” (2 Corinthians 5:14), unquestionably connotes substitution. It would be ridiculous to believe that *huper* would here mean only “benefit,” since such a rendering would destroy the significance of the passage.

Another, belief of Calvinism is called “irresistible grace.” The Calvinist insists that salvation is based on the free will of God, and since God is omnipotent, His grace cannot be resisted.¹⁷

Irresistible grace poses difficulties in several areas. For example, it is theologically problematic, for it implies that God alone is responsible for thwarting his own will. If grace is irresistible, the God who “is not willing that any should perish (2 Peter 3:9) denies to a large segment of humankind the grace apart from which no one can come to “the knowledge of the truth.” God’s saving hand is held out to those to whom he arbitrarily refuses the power needed to respond. This makes a sham of the imagery of God as a loving Father waiting with open arms for the wayward son (Luke 15:11—24; Romans 10:21).

Irresistible grace is difficult to reconcile with the biblical understanding of grace. The New Testament indicates that God’s grace is available even to those who will perish (Titus 2:11; 2 Cor. 6:1), and the ministry of grace is to be present universally in the world (John 1 2:3 2; 1 6:8-1 1; 2 Cor. 5:1 9). Consequently, the overarching tone of the entire New Testament is one of “whosoever will may come” (Revelation 22:1 7). This seemingly universally available grace cannot be the irresistible variety so important to Calvinism.

¹⁷ Duane Edward Spencer, TULIP, (Baker), p.44

The Bible is very clear that God changes His actions when people change.¹⁸ I am somewhat puzzled if no one among the elect rejects this irresistible grace or is even capable of rejecting why does scripture even bother to warn people against rejecting?¹⁹ Also, if no one among the elect falls away, or is even capable of falling away why does scripture even bother to warn people against falling away?²⁰

Irresistible grace is philosophically problematic, when viewed in terms of the old question of the relationship between “ought” and “can”: Does a moral command entail the ability to obey? I believe that an actual moral choice—such as that of accepting or rejecting God’s salvation—requires the presence of bonafide options. In philosophical terms, moral decisions require not only an “ought” but a “can.” According to Calvinism, although all persons ought to come to Christ, not all can, for not all are the objects of God’s irresistible grace. All are challenged by the divine “ought,” but many lack the “can.” If grace was irresistible everyone would be saved. In light of God saying he, “is not willing that any should perish (2 Peter 3:9). If grace is indeed irresistible, wherein lies the moral victory for God?

Again, as I said earlier, for a born—again Christian to *voluntarily* allow Christ to live His life in and through him or her is fundamental Christianity. But for God to cause anyone and everyone to do things (even believing) regardless of whether they consent or not is rape.

PROBLEMS IN ARMINIANISM AND/ OR WESLEYANISM

The problem with the Arminian view of perseverance is similar to the problem of the Calvinistic view of perseverance. That is, in Calvinism and Arminianism, justification and sanctification are hardly (if at all) distinguishable. In fact, some Calvinist refer to justification and sanctification as double justification. The Arminian says that if you do not persevere to the end, you will lose your salvation. The Calvinist says if you do not persevere unto the end, you were never saved. But neither can simply accept the record of Scripture that if you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, you will be saved. Both, in effect, say that you must believe and keep on believing in a way that manifests itself through perseverance to the end to be certain of your ultimate salvation.

¹⁸ Ex. 32:10-12, 14; Josh. 24:20; 1 Chron. 21:13, 15; Ps. 106:44-45; Prov. 10:27; Eccles. 7:17; Jer. 18:8, 10; Jer. 26:2-3; Jer. 42:10-12; Hos. 11:8-9; Joel 2:13-14; Amos 7:3, 6; Jonah 3:10; cf. 3:2, 4; 4:2;

¹⁹ 1 Chron. 28:9; Ex. 16:4; Deut. 8:2; Deut. 13:3; Deut. 30:17-18; Judges 2:20-22; cf. Ex. 33:2; 34:24; Judg. 3:4; 1 Sam. 2:30; 1 Sam. 12:14-15; Zech. 3:7; Matt. 16:24; John 8:31; John 15:10; 2 Chron. 12:6-7; 2 Chron. 16:9; Ps. 81:13-14; Jer. 3:14, 22; Isa. 55:7; Hosea 14:4; 1 Tim. 4:16; 2 Peter 1:10; 2 Peter 3:17

²⁰ Matt. 24:13; Luke 9:62; John 8:31, 32; Rom. 11:21-24; 1 Cor. 9:27; 1 Cor. 10:12; 1 Cor. 15:58; Col. 1:21-23; Heb. 3:6, 12-13; Heb. 10:26; Heb. 12:15; 2 Peter 1:10;

Again, Arminianism denies the believer security whereas Calvinism denies the believer assurance.

A SLIPPERY ISSUE

The discussion of this paper prompts the question: Who are we to be questioning God? It's a valid question, so here's an answer: We're just His born—again children trying to understand how our Father operates. As I said earlier, my purpose is not to indict God, but to challenge a concept that does indict God, by tracing out its implications.

In the Book of Job, there is an attempt to “corner” God with this issue. Job is a righteous man who has suffered multiple calamities through no fault of his own.

Job finally demands to know “Why?” God’s answer is a series of “who—are—you’s?” and “where—were—you’s.” “Who are you to question me, Job?” says God. “Where were you when I made the world?... You cannot even ask, let alone understand!”

The hard lesson Job learned was that God did not create the world to meet human expectations and to allow human beings to replace God as creation’s meaning givers. Life’s meaning and fulfillment are found only in the gratuity of God’s gift of himself to us. Our freedom responds to God’s freedom, but God’s ability is not limited by our reason.

The completeness of Job’s submission to God’s unlimited freedom in the intimate presence of God is so total that the final result of the book of Job can appear to be one of absolute irrationalism. God can do anything He wants anywhere, anytime, and who is Job—or who are we—to question Him? The freedom of God’s will is so heavily stressed in the book of Job because the book wants to lead people to an experience of the living God rather than to a lifeless doctrine about God. Job ends up admitting that he cannot understand as God *understands*. He says, “Up to now I had only heard of Thee. But now I have seen Thee with my own eyes” (Job 42:5).

Our challenge in thinking about God is a challenge to see how personal a God we can stand. Job contrasts the distant knowledge about God that comes by hearing with the intimacy of direct personal presence with God, which he compares to seeing God.

God did not have to create, nor did he have to create moral beings who might sin. That he did so was his own free choice. But once he freely chose to create moral beings, his nature was *bound* to react in wrath if they chose to sin. This does not limit his sovereignty, because he freely and knowingly put himself into this position through his sovereign decree to create this kind of world.

I have heard more than one Christian say that if God is not controlling our circumstances, then there must not be a God at all and their faith is destroyed. I take the opposite view. If I ever became convinced that God does in fact normally determine, cause, and control people's actions and circumstances, my faith in God would be shattered. His fruits would reveal Him to be morally ambivalent at best and malevolent at worst. The popular caricatures of God would be more accurate than Christ's portrait. Life would have no hope and certainly no meaning. I would dismiss Christianity as a cruel superstition and be done with it. And I would do so in perfect conscience, knowing that my very renunciation was itself God's doing.

In the final analyses what is at stake here is not just man's freedom but God's freedom also. A sovereign God is a God who is free to limit himself with regard to his works, a God who is free to decide not to determine, causes, and controls people's behavior and circumstances, if he so chooses, a God who is free to bestow the gift of relative independence on his creatures. Such freedom does not diminish God's sovereignty; it magnifies it. Yes, it magnifies God's sovereignty!

We've been wrestling with one of the slipperiest issues in Christendom. It is one of those issues on which the Bible leaves expansive room for honest disagreement. It's not the Bible is faulty; only that rightly dividing it on this particular issue is all but impossible. God operates the way He operates—His ways are a matter of fact—even if we can't be entirely certain what the facts are. It will be the very first question I ask the Lord when I meet Him, and I haven't the slightest doubt that He will show me the elegant solution that has been staring us all in the face for thousands of years.

But in the meantime I have to live with a belief. I for one cannot live with the belief that God normally determines, causes, and controls people's behavior and circumstances, because the implications are intolerable.

Your brother in Christ,

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APPENDIX

10 Questions for the Calvinist

1. The Bible says in John 6:44, "no one can come to me unless the Father who sent Me draws him." The same word "draw" is used in John 12:32 which says, "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth will draw all men unto myself." Matthew 23:37 says that men can resist God's will.

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling."

How do you answer this problem in Calvinism?

2. The Bible says in 2 Thessalonians 2:10 that reprobates "perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved."

From your Calvinistic worldview, how can it logically be said that a reprobate refuses to love the truth and so be saved, when your God determines that the reprobate can't love the truth, can't be saved, and therefore doesn't refuse God at all?

3. In Romans 9 where God says, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy" why do you automatically assume that God does not want to have mercy on all but only have mercy on the select few when God clearly tells us in Romans 11:32 that, "God has bound all men over to disobedience so that He may have mercy on them all?"

If you say that all means all classes of men, but not all men in every class, then why does it not mean all classes of men but not all men in every class in Romans 3:23 where it says, "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God?"

Does this mean some have not sinned? Perhaps, for instance, the Virgin Mary?

4. Calvinism excludes individual faith from the salvation process, classifying such faith as a work.

How can Calvinists classify faith as a work when Paul specifically excludes faith from works in Romans 3:27-28 and 4:5?

5. It is often said by Calvinists that dead men can't respond. As you say, "you are dead in your trespasses & sins." Eph. 2:1.

In Romans 6, it says that "in the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus."

If being dead in sin means one can't respond to God then does being dead to sin mean that the Christian cannot respond to sin?

6. Jonah 2:8 says that "those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs."

If, as Calvinism teaches, God determined before time began who would be reprobates, and therefore does not extend the grace to them by which they could be saved, how logically can we understand this verse's statement that these reprobates, "forfeited the grace that could be theirs?"

7. You say that even the "good" acts of sinners are "bad" because they come from a completely depraved nature. Is it a "bad" act to rationally apprehend the truthfulness of apologetics?

If so, why has God commanded us to practice apologetics to sinners, which causes them to do a bad act? Doesn't that mean that God causes sinners' bad acts?

If you say "yes," doesn't that make God a bad guy?

8. You have said that nothing thwarts the will of God, and you also have said that a man's will cannot be free or else God would not be absolutely sovereign.

Doesn't this mean that God determines (or is the cause of) evil and the evil acts of men for his sovereign pleasure?

9. Even though God does perfectly know all human thoughts, can man have thoughts that have never been thought before (i.e. ex-nihilo thoughts)?

If these thoughts are not free (e.g., they are determined) then has God caused all thoughts, including evil ones, which would make God the author of sin and evil and man not responsible?

If, on the other hand, these thoughts are free, then how can God remain sovereign according to the Calvinist definition of sovereignty?

10. When Calvinism is shown to have logical contradictions, Calvinists usually reply that God's thoughts are unsearchable, and therefore the logical problems that Calvinism has, for example divine election and human responsibility, exhaustive sovereignty and human free will, and God's having two contradictory wills, are solved by invoking the phrase, "well that's a mystery."

If you can solve your logic problems by copping out with the term mystery, why can't the Arminian types, atheists and others pull the same move?

SUGESTED READING:

- David L. Allen, "Whosoever Will: A Biblical-Theological Critique of Five-Point Calvinism (2010)
- George Bryson, "The Dark Side of Calvinism: The Calvinist Caste System (2004)
- Norm L Geisler, "Chosen But Free: A Balanced View of God's Sovereignty and Free Will" (2010)
- James R. White, "Potter's Freedom: A Defense of the Reformation and the Rebuttal of Norman Geisler's Chosen But Free" (2000)
- Laurence M. Vance, "The Other Side of Calvinism (1999)
- Chuck Smith, "Calvinism, Arminianism, and the Word of God: A Calvary Chapel Perspective (1993)
- Roger E. Olson, Against Calvinism: Rescuing God's Reputation from Radical Reformed Theology (2011)
- Michael S. Horton, "For Calvinism" (2011)
- Jerry L. Walls and Joseph R. Dongell, "Why I Am Not a Calvinist (2004)
- Robert A. Peterson, "Why I Am Not an Arminian (2004)