

A Position Paper on Anthropology
Providence, Free Agency, and Cause

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PROVIDENCE

The doctrine of God's providence is both the sweetest doctrine and the most terrifying doctrine in all the Bible, depending on who you are. If you are God's child, what can be more reassuring than to know that not even a sparrow "will fall to the ground apart from your Father," for you are worth more to him "than many sparrows" (Matt 10:29, 31)?¹ But if you are God's enemy, what more terrifying news can you receive than that "the God in whose hand are your life-breath and your ways, you have not glorified" (Dan 5:23)? This moral groundwork seems to be the real reason why there has been so much controversy over such a clear teaching.

The Bible plainly teaches God's providence over all things. As Ecclesiastes says, "There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven" (Eccl 3:1). This does not mean that God is inviting us to do them, which we may forego; for the first couplet mentions birth and death, which are beyond our choice (Eccl 3:2). Moreover, this inevitable occurrence does not come from impersonal fate, but from personal direction. *God* appoints them (3:11). This universal command of God dictates not only one's day of death (Eccl 8:8; Job 14:5; Ps 139:16; Matt 6:27), but even the ordinary events of life, such as a "time to gather stones" (Eccl 3:5). Even the dice lands only as God directs (Prov 16:33)! Such complete and lasting mastery over everything *should* provoke us to fear Him (3:14). The only proper response to God's perfect kingship is fear (Mal 1:14; Ps 47:2; Prov 24:21). But our foolish hearts lie to us, denying this doctrine. Instead of fearing God, we flatter ourselves concerning the discovery of our transgressions (Ps 36:1-2). Instead of fearing God, we in essence conclude, "There is no God" (Ps 14:1).² All sin says, "No God" (Ps 10:4). The wicked "says to himself, 'God has forgotten; He has hidden His face; He will never see it'" (10:11). Therefore, if we ever find ourselves coldly sneering at God's providence, let us repent, for we do not fear God. And if we are slow to fear Him, let us remember that "the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him" (Ps 103:13). The great arm of His providential power will turn from hitting us to holding us.

Now, admittedly, there is much which we do not and cannot understand concerning this

¹ All biblical quotations are from the New American Standard Bible.

² Luther justly said that merely claiming "Absurdity!" is not an adequate rebuttal to the Scriptural doctrine of Providence. Reason cannot believe that a good God can yet harden. But, says Luther, "She would certainly understand, were it said of God that He hardens none and damns none, but has mercy on all and saves all, so that hell is destroyed, and the fear of death may be put away, and no future punishment need be dreaded!" (Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. James I. Packer and O. R. Johnston [Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1957], p. 202).

doctrine. How can every event, including things we choose (such as gathering stones) and things we cannot (such as dying), be by God's appointment? The former is especially inscrutable. But this inscrutability is nothing new to Christianity, but is common to those aspects of reality in which the divine controls the human concomitantly, i.e. without destroying the true integrity of the human element. Is not the divine supervision of all human events of the same order as the Inspiration of Scripture or the Incarnation of God's Son? God does not expect us to explain how they exist, but merely to believe that they do.³ Let us no longer explore, but adore.

Consider the following examples of wonder. First, consider how God sends. It was Judah's brainchild that Joseph was sold into slavery; yet Joseph later told his brothers, "God sent me before you to preserve life" (Gen 37:26-27; 45:5). It was the idea of Saul's servant to consult the man of God; yet God had told Samuel the day before, "About this time tomorrow I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin" (1 Sam 9:16). Second, consider how God gives. The Israelites were told not to harass the Edomites "because I have given Mount Seir to Esau as a possession" (Deut 2:5); yet it was with much exertion that "the sons of Esau dispossessed [the Horites] and destroyed them from before them and settled in their place" (2:12). It was the counsel of "the young men" which told Rehoboam to behave insolently; yet the prophet rightly says that "it was a turn of events from the LORD, that He might establish His word" by giving much of the kingdom to Jeroboam (1 Kings 12:15). Finally, consider how God redeemed us by the cross. Jesus was indeed "delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God;" yet Peter correctly added, "You nailed [Him] to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death" (Acts 2:23). Where is the man who can untie such a weave? Is not the hidden current of Providence enough to evoke from us, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is too high, I cannot attain to it" (Ps 139:6)?

Like all such doctrines, though we cannot explain how they are so, still we must describe what it is not, lest our brothers and sisters draw wrong conclusions from this doctrine. First, God's providence is not impersonal fate. We disagree with the ancient astrologers, who taught that one's life was written in the stars, as if this is the way reality has been for eternity—no meaning, just there.⁴ Nor is it accurate, secondly, to modify fate by putting a Creator at its beginning. This is deism. God did not just set up the dominoes and sit back in the heavens to watch them fall.⁵ Third, God's providence is not predestination.

³ As Luther says in response to Erasmus' charge that the Scriptures are unclear, "Scripture makes the straightforward affirmation that [these doctrines] are facts. There is nothing obscure or ambiguous about that. You imagine that Scripture tells us how they are what they are; but it does not, nor need we know" (*Bondage*, p. 73).

⁴ Astrologers disagreed over "whether the stars caused or signified events" (Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993], p. 224). Evolution is similarly impersonal and meaningless. Christians most emphatically do not believe in fate. As Calvin said, "We are not Stoics who dream up a fate based on a continuous connection of events" (*The Bondage and Liberation of the Will: A Defense of the Orthodox Doctrine of Human Choice against Pighius*, ed. A. N. S. Lane, trans. G. I. Davies [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996], p. 38).

⁵ Millard Erickson shows his affinity to this position by citing at length from Leibniz (*Christian Theology* [Grand Rapids: Baker,

Predestination plans, but providence performs. God says, “I have planned it, surely I will do it” (Isa 46:11). Fourth, neither is providence mere prescience (commonly, called foreknowledge). In fact, this prior knowledge of all events is dependent on both predestination and providence. God appoints what will happen and then authoritatively brings them about. God can declare the future, because He can say, “My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure” (Isa 46:10).⁶ In all these misconceptions, the one thing absent is God’s continual oversight of His world. God is the King, not the Spectator (e.g. Psalm 2:1-4). Fifth and finally, God is not just in control. This is a very common perception of providence. In this view, God is the grand Foreman, who oversees the project and can intervene at any moment when needed.⁷ Instead, providence means that God appoints *everything* and makes *everything* appropriate in its time (Eccl 3:1,11). As the prophet asked, “Who is there who speaks and it comes to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both good and ill go forth?” (Lam 3:37-38). God sent Joseph. God gave Seir to Esau. God delivered up His Son. All three are appropriately attributed to God.

Many object to providence, thinking that it makes God the author of sin. After all, God cannot even be tempted by evil, let alone sin (Jas 1:13). Therefore, when God providentially uses some human’s evil action, He must not be sinning. God’s purpose is different and larger than what the action human agents seek. God always does right (Gen 18:25). If even a victim of such providential evil can say to his malefactors, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (Gen 50:20), then surely, we can too. As Calvin says, “He is a wonderfully expert craftsman who can use even bad tools well.”⁸

Once we assert that everything happens providentially, we must also guard against another error—that of thinking that God has the same relationship to every action. Though all good and ill go forth from His *mouth* (in that He sovereignly commands them), not every action is done by His *hand*. Though God is truly “at work in [believers], both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (Phil 2:13), it would be inappropriate to say that God is working in the same way in unbelievers so that they will and work contrary to His expressed will. It is not God, but Satan, who “is now working in the sons of disobedience” (Eph 2:3). Luther brings out this truth well in his doctrine of two kingdoms and his

1983, 1984, 1985], p. 358).

⁶ A good defense of divine prescience is found in Jonathan Edwards, *A Careful and Strict Inquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of that Freedom of Will. Which is Supposed to Be Essential to Moral Agency, Virtue and Vice. Reward and Punishment. Praise and Blame*, 2.11, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols., ed. Edward Hickman (reprint of 1834 ed., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 1:30-35.

⁷ Calvin corrects this view in his definition of God’s omnipotence, “God is deemed omnipotent, not because he can act though he may cease or be idle, or because by a general instinct, he continues the order of nature previously appointed; but because, governing heaven and earth by his providence, he so overrules all things that nothing happens without his counsel” (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.16.3, 2 vols., trans. Henry Beveridge [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957], 1:174).

⁸ John Calvin, *Bondage and Liberation*, p. 40. This reference to tools is not forced, for the prophet Isaiah describes the wicked Assyrian king Sennacherib as God’s “axe” and “rod” (Isa 10:5, 15).

analogy of a horse with a rider:

So man's will is like a beast standing between two riders. If God rides, it wills and goes where God wills.... If Satan rides, it wills and goes where Satan wills. Nor may it choose to which rider it will run, or which it will seek; but the riders themselves fight to decide who shall have and hold it.⁹

Luther seems to exceed Scripture when he says that God is even at work in Satan.¹⁰ Though God has appointed Satan's action, God is not the efficient cause ἐνεργεῶν within him. God commands him outside him (Job 1-2).

What, then, should our response be to God's providence? We have already mentioned fear and adoration. We should also refrain from boasting of tomorrow (Prov 27:1; Jas 4:13-16). Instead of boasting, we should ask God to bless our works lest they be done in vain (Ps 127:1). We should also reread Ecclesiastes, for throughout its thesis of life's brevity under God's inscrutable providence, it continually exhorts us to refrain from two chief errors with regard to this doctrine—irreverence (like those who deny its truth) and laziness (like those who float down the river of fate).¹¹ Even when future providence is certain, we have no right to disobey God who has appointed that our obedience to be the means of fulfilling His promise (cf. Acts 27:22 and 31).¹² In short, let us fear God and keep His commandments.

FREE AGENCY

From the very beginning, Christian theologians have argued that man is a free agent, i.e. he acts freely. In contrast to the gnostic sects, who taught that some men were no different than the animals,¹³ early Christian theologians such as Irenaeus taught that man was endowed with free will. As rational beings, humans were created with the “power of choice.”¹⁴ As evidence of this unique power, this

⁹ Luther, *Bondage*, pp. 103-104.

¹⁰ Luther writes, “Since God moves and works all in all [wrongly based on Eph 1:11], He moves and works of necessity even in Satan and the ungodly. But He works according to what they are, and what He finds them to be” (*Bondage*, p. 204; cf. Calvin, *Bondage and Liberation*, p. 39). Luther's qualification is true, but does not change the fact that Luther sees the same kind of action at work within believers for good as within unbelievers for evil. About the closest thing Scripture mentions to this is the act of hardening (e.g. Pharaoh), the sending of a deluding ἐνέργειαν (2 Thess 2:11), and the fact that God stirred up the spirit of the Philistines to attack Judah (2 Chron 21:16). None of these instances demand the same kind of ruling action as when God is said to “work” within His saints.

¹¹ The Stoics taught that fate was like a river and our resistance is like the eddies. Even though we fight, we still move downstream. Therefore, they advised a passive coast to fate (Ferguson, *Early Christian Backgrounds*, p. 339). This is wrong. Uncertain providence means only that we should diversify, not suspend, our labor (Eccl 11:1-6). Calvin has grasped this concept well, and should be read by all though who use providence as a pretext for presumption (see *Institutes*, 1.17.4).

¹² Edwards seemed to be quite impressed by this Scriptural example through a certain writer named Cooper (see Jonathan Edwards, *Miscellaneous Remarks*, 3.24, in *The Works of President Edwards*, 10 vols. [New York: Burt Franklin], 8:372-373). The two-volume Hickman edition of Edwards' works does not quote or even cite Cooper.

¹³ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 283.

¹⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.37.1, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols., ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, revised by A. Cleveland Coxe (reprint of 1885 ed., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 1:518.

ἀντεξούσιον, consider both that God gives commandments to men and that He holds men responsible for obedience. Man possesses this free will, because “God is possessed of free will, in whose likeness man was created...”¹⁵ Man is higher than the animals, who operate by mere instinct.¹⁶ Men and women deliberate and then choose between alternatives. In contrast, cats never ponder over what to do when the sun goes down—to go mousing or to lick fur? In this historical context, preoccupation with human liberty became a peculiar trait of Christianity.¹⁷

Early Christian teachers were correct in fighting the gnostic error. The Bible teaches that man is constitutionally different than animals. Horses and mules “have no understanding” (Ps 32:9). Though a man may grow so depraved and become so overrun by his passions that he is “like unreasoning animals, born as creatures of instinct to be captured and killed” (2 Pet 2:12), he is nevertheless still a man. Unbelievers are not animals. This point is quite aptly shown by wicked king Nebuchadnezzar. God punished him by letting “his mind be changed from that of a man, and [by letting] a beast’s mind be given to him” (Dan 4:16). But before God did this, was he not a rational, though sinful, human being?

It is not enough, however, to assert that man is rational. This term is capable to being misconstrued, as if man is just a computing being. When Irenaeus argued for man’s free will, he asserted that God gave to man’s mind a moral taste, so that “the eye of the mind, receiving experience of both [good and evil], may with judgment make choice of the better things.”¹⁸ If anyone shuns this capacity to receive and register moral stimuli, “he unawares divests himself of the character of a human being.”¹⁹ In other words, man is not simply a free agent; he is a free *moral* agent. This is what God is; therefore, those made in His image possess this mental framework as well. Jonathan Edwards made this point as follows:

A moral Agent is a being that is capable of those actions that have a *moral* quality, and which can properly be denominated good or evil in a moral sense, virtuous or vicious, commendable or faulty. To moral Agency belongs a *moral faculty*, or sense of moral good and evil, or of such a thing as desert or worthiness, of praise or blame, reward or punishments; and a capacity which an Agent has of being influenced in his actions by moral inducements or motives, exhibited to the view of understanding and reason, to engage to a conduct agreeable to the moral faculty.

...And herein does very much consist that image of God, wherein God made man,...by which God distinguished man from the beasts, viz. in those faculties and principles of nature, whereby he

¹⁵ Ibid., 4.37.4, 1:519.

¹⁶ Origen observes that though “the instinct in hunting-dogs and in war-horses approaches somehow, so to speak, to the faculty of reason,” the only earthly creature truly having this faculty is man, who alone is enabled unto “the contemplation of virtue and vice” (Origen, *De Principiis*, 3.1.3, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols., ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, revised by A. Cleveland Coxé [reprint of 1885 ed., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994], 4:303.

¹⁷ Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, trans. A. H. C. Downes (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), p. 307.

¹⁸ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.39.1, 1:522.

¹⁹ Ibid.

is capable of moral agency.²⁰

Sinful man retains his manliness in that he always acts in a moral sense. Even in sinning, he must justify his actions (Prov 16:2; 21:2). The only difference is that he now worships himself and other creatures, rather than the Creator (Rom 1:21-25). All his moral faculties are bent on the delusion that he *himself* is glorious. Why else is he so angry when other men refuse to praise him? In this way, man is both moral and immoral, made in God's image (Jas 3:9) and yet in need of renewal into that same image (Col 3:10; 2 Cor 3:18).

This unremittent moral agency is what makes man responsible for his sins. Beasts simply perish (Ps 49:12, 20). Man rises to meet his Maker in judgment (Heb 9:27; John 5:28-29). We all must give Jesus an account of our deeds, for they are not just actions—they are “good or bad” (2 Cor 5:10). This recompense will be no surprise, for God has so constituted us with conscience that even the unrepentant recognize evil desert in this life (Rom 1:32) and will face their own conscience at the final bar exam (Rom 2:14-16).

Before moving on, one caution is in order. It is quite evident from the Bible that the will of man is not free in all respects. Jesus taught that some are slaves of sin (John 8:34). Peter speaks of those who are “slaves of corruption,” giving this maxim: “By what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved.” Even godless societies such as modern America recognize the reality of such things as “addiction.” Therefore, when we say that man has a “free will,” we are speaking of man *as man*, in contrast to the beasts. But when we say man lacks “free will,” we are speaking of man *as sinner*, incapable of doing what is good (Rom 3:12). This peculiar slavery, unique to moral free agents, will become clearer in the following discussion of human causation.

CAUSE

What causes us to do what we do? If we are free, does anything cause our actions? Since God is ruling us in providence, there must be some connection between His rule and our behavior; and since we are free moral agents, there must be some sense in which our actions are our own, so that we can be held responsible for them. Thus, we have that mysterious relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Let us examine how the notion of “cause” relates to each of these. But before we can do this, we must first establish some sort of workable definition.

One of the greatest Christian metaphysicians to ever have considered this complex relationship between cause, freedom, and sovereignty is Jonathan Edwards. In his classic work, *Freedom of the Will*, Edwards wrote that the word “cause” signified

²⁰ Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 1:12.

any *antecedent*, either natural or moral, positive or negative, on which an Event, either a thing, or the manner and circumstance of a thing, so depends, that it is the ground and reason, either in whole, or in part, why it is, rather than not; or why it is as it is, rather than otherwise;...whether it has any positive influence, or not.²¹

Concerning the last qualification, Edwards also added that some things are “perhaps rather an occasion than a Cause, most properly speaking.”²² We will use Edwards’ definition as our working definition.

Now let us consider divine causation and human causation.

Divine Causation

With respect to divine providence, since nothing comes to pass without God’s command (Lam 3:37-38), God is ultimately the Cause of everything. He is the highest order cause. As Paul says, “And from Him and through Him and to Him are all things” (Rom 11:36; cf. 1 Cor 8:6; 2 Cor 5:18; Heb 3:4). We cannot point to any aspect of reality and say that it did not come to pass apart from divine appointment. Not even a sparrow falls to the ground “apart from” God (Matt 10:29)? The easiest way to at least gain an initial recognition of this doctrine is to consider how God’s power *occasions* everything. Consider any action done by a man. Could not God have taken away that man’s breath before he acted? Could not God have removed the man’s reason, as He did with Nebuchadnezzar? Did not that man owe his very birth to the formation of God’s hand in the womb (Psalm 139:13-16)? Truly, when we consider our dependence on such power, we exclaim, “He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no can ward off His hand or say to Him, ‘What hast Thou done?’” (Dan 4:35).

Within this general providential causation, there are what theologians often call “secondary causes,” whether animate or inanimate. This is perhaps stated best by the Westminster formulation:

Although, in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first Cause, all things come to pass immutably, and infallibly; yet, by the same providence, He ordereth them to fall out, according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.²³

The phrase “according to the nature of second causes” means that God brings about His appointed ends through means, without destroying their nature. For example, when God has appointed a crop, He normally brings it about according to the nature of plants:

Thou dost visit the earth, and cause it to overflow;

²¹ Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 1:15.

²² Ibid.

²³ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 5.2 (reprint, Atlanta: Committee for Christian Education & Publications, 1990). The terminology was not new. John Calvin wrote in his reply to Pighius that God “employs certain methods, as it were means, or secondary causes” (*Bondage and Liberation*, p. 38).

Thou dost greatly enrich it;
 The stream of God is full of water;
 Thou dost prepare their grain, for thus Thou dost prepare the earth.
 Thou dost water its furrows abundantly;
 Thou dost settle its ridges;
 Thou dost soften it with showers;
 Thou dost bless its growth (Psalm 65:9-10).

In this psalm, it is difficult to miss the fact that God is causing the growth. But He causes it in accordance with the nature He originally instilled in plants. Not only this, God's providence also extends to the farmer's hands. God uses the farmer's diligence and skill to accomplish this end. Even before sin entered the world God had ordained that plants multiply under the art of gardening (Gen 2:5). Thus, we should not be surprised to read in the prophet:

Does the farmer plow continually to plant seed?
 Does he continually turn and harrow the ground?
 Does he not level its surface,
 And sow dill and scatter cummin,
 And plant wheat in rows,
 Barley in its place, and rye within its area?
For his God instructs and teaches him properly.
 For dill is not threshed with a threshing sledge,
 Nor is the cartwheel driven over cummin;
 But dill is beaten out with a rod, and cummin with a club.
 Grain for bread is crushed,
 Indeed, he does not continue to thresh it forever.
 Because the wheel of his cart and his horses eventually damage it,
 He does not thresh it longer.
*This also comes from the LORD of hosts,
 Who has made His counsel wonderful and His wisdom great (Isaiah 28:24-29).*

Thus, both the plants and the hand of the farmer are subtly directed according to the secret working of God to produce what He has appointed—a harvest! The way the apostle Paul makes use of the farmer analogy in 1 Corinthians 3:5-8 shows that it is a good paradigm for the way God typically accomplishes His purpose through the free agency of man.²⁴

Someone may object that God cannot use the actions of evil men in this fashion. Though it is easy to attribute a harvest to providence, it is not easy to attribute a homicide to providence. Were the Reformers correct in attributing evil deeds to providence (without thereby *blaming* God)? Luther told Erasmus:

Here you see that when God works in and by evil men, evil deeds result; yet God, though He does evil by means of evil men, cannot act evilly Himself, for He is good, and cannot do evil; but He uses evil instruments, which cannot escape the impulse and movement of His power. The fault

²⁴ Calvin makes good use of this analogy in his defense of the fact that divine providence does not imply that means are of no avail in the ministry (see *Bondage and Liberation*, pp. 32-33, 162-165).

which accounts for evil being done when God moves to action lies in these instruments, which God does not allow to be idle. In the same way a carpenter would cut badly with a saw-toothed axe.²⁵

According to Luther, when God brings about events through the action of evil men, “God works according to what they are, and what He finds them to be.”²⁶ In similar manner, Calvin called for humility in considering this doctrine, saying, “We do not say that the wicked sin of necessity in such a way as to imply that they sin without wilful and deliberate intent. The necessity comes from the fact that God accomplishes his work, which is sure and steadfast, through them. At the same time, however, the will and purpose to do evil which dwells within them makes them liable to censure.”²⁷ Were they correct in these assertions?

Yes, the Reformers were correct, for this doctrine is biblical. When Pighius objected that Calvin’s teaching comes from Luther and not from Scripture, Calvin cited Isaiah’s title of Assyria as God’s “rod” (Isaiah 10:5, 15).²⁸ But if one wicked king (the king of Assyria) is God’s tool, surely this must apply to all kings. Thus, it is not surprising to find this sacred proverb: “The king’s heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes” (Prov 21:1; e.g. Rev 17:17). But if this is true of the most sovereign individuals on earth, surely this must apply to all men. Consequently, we are not surprised to read, “Man’s steps are ordained by the LORD, how then can man understand his way?” (Prov 20:24; cf. Prov 16:9). The Reformers did not invent this truth. Indeed, some of the most startling examples from Scripture were noted centuries before by Augustine. In one masterful sweep, this brother cites the fear in the Israelites before Ai (Josh 7:4, 12), the hardening of Canaanite hearts (Josh 11:20), God telling Shimei to curse David (2 Sam 16:9-12), God stirring up the spirit of the Philistines (2 Chron 21:16-17), and many more examples.²⁹ Given this biblical witness, the Reformers rightly concluded, “All we say is that God is in charge of the world which he established and not only holds in his power the events of the natural world, but also governs the hearts of men, bends their wills this way and that in accordance with his choice, and is the director of their actions, so that they in the end do nothing which he has not decreed, whatever they may try to do.”³⁰

²⁵ Luther, *Bondage*, p. 204. This reference to tools is subtly different in Calvin’s remark that God “is a wonderfully expert craftsman who can use even bad tools well” (*Bondage and Liberation*, p. 40). Can you detect the difference? And yet, can you see how they do not contradict?

²⁶ *Ibid.* Later Luther reminds us “how incessantly active God is in all his creatures, allowing none of them to keep holiday” (p. 206).

²⁷ Calvin, *Bondage and Liberation*, p. 37.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

²⁹ Aurelius Augustine, *On Grace and Free Will*, 41 and 42, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, 14 vols., ed. Philip Schaff (reprint of 1887 ed., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 5:461-462.

³⁰ Calvin, *Bondage and Liberation*, p. 38.

Three cautions are in order before moving on. First, man's actions and God's actions are distinct, even though the event itself is one. This distinction is rooted in the different purposes of man and God (e.g. Gen 50:20; Isa 10:7).³¹ Second, as noted earlier, not all God's actions are on the same level. Poetically speaking, we might say that everything happens by God's mouth, but not everything by His hand. Third, we must not toss these doctrines aside as irrelevant for our Christian walk. At least two reasons show that these doctrines are absolutely necessary for correct Christian faith: (1) God should receive glory for the cross, without receiving any of the blame for the injustice done by men (e.g. Acts 2:23; Rom 8:32); and (2) God should be trusted in all things, for He makes even the wickedness done against His children serve their good (Rom 8:28), as in Joseph's career (Gen 45:5; 50:20). Let each child of God ask Himself whether this is *irrelevant* to one's spiritual joy and comfort.

Human Causation

Given the biblical and practical background of providential causation, we are not surprised to find later generations with the Reformed movement generalizing this compatibility between providence and all events (including those done by free moral agents). In their classic statement on predestination and providence, the Westminster divines confessed:

God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.³²

This statement introduces us to the source of human causation—our wills. We have seen that God causes even our freely-willed actions. We must also acknowledge that violence is not done to our wills. By “violence,” the Westminster divines were taking their lead from John Knox, who defined it as, “Violence is done to the will of a creature when it willeth one thing and yet by force, by tyranny, or by a greater power, it is compelled to do the things which it would not.”³³ In other words, what we *want*, will, and even think accomplishes God's purposes infallibly, and oh so mysteriously.

In discussing causation and the will, it is easy to step off into metaphysical speculations regarding if there is any necessity within man himself (in the laws of his mind), which determines every one of his specific actions or whether there is a mysterious liberty within him. William Cunningham proves quite conclusively that the Presbyterian tradition does not require that one hold to any doctrine of

³¹ When Calvin envisions an objection that God drives and forces evil men to do their deeds, he responds, “Indeed, but in such a way that in a single deed the action of God is one thing and their own action is another. For they gratify their evil and wicked desires, but God turns this wickedness so as to bring his judgments to execution” (*Bondage and Liberation*, p. 37).

³² *Westminster Confession of Faith*, III i.

³³ This is quoted by William Cunningham, who thereby masterfully set the Confession's statement in its historical context (*The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* [reprint of 1862 ed., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967], p. 492).

psychological necessity.³⁴ Even though Edwards may be correct in stating that “in some sense, *the Will always follows the last dictate of the understanding*,” taking understanding “in a large sense as including the whole faculty of perception or apprehension, and not merely what is called *reason or judgment*,”³⁵ this still does not explain why the understanding is as it is in every specific instance. When trying to explain the workings of our hearts, we must be cautious of our conclusions, for as Jeremiah notes, “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer 17:9). Only God. The ultimate reason for humbly refraining from theories of moral psychology is the inexplicable fact that Adam was created with an upright heart and yet sought out evil (Eccl 7:29). This fact points to a mysterious freedom within man, which seems to defy our short-sighted theories of rigid causation within man and yet most assuredly adheres at all times to the subtle appointment of the Almighty.

Having given that disclaimer, there are at least four biblical doctrines which must be believed regarding causation *within* man. First, all our moral actions come from the heart. This truth can be seen in Proverbs’ counsel to “watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life” (Prov 4:23). Lest any should make excuses for their evil deeds by attributing them to food or to their bodies, Jesus said, “Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slander” (Matt 15:19). Second, though the Bible does not explain all the working of the heart in *why* it desires specific things, the Bible does classify the heart as either good or bad. Thus, the actions which come out of a heart correspond to its nature. As Jesus said, “Every good tree bears good fruit; but the bad tree bears bad fruit” (Matt 7:17).³⁶ Third, since the heart is evil, and since all our actions spring from our heart, a person with an evil heart only does evil and so is in bondage to sin (John 8:34; Rom 3:9-12; 8:6-8; Eph 2:3; Titus 3:3). Fourth, since the evil heart cannot desire what is truly good, this action of liberation is solely by divine initiative. God alone is the Savior (John 8:36). This is the true *biblical* doctrine of what Calvin called “the bondage and liberation of the will.” Though man may recognize the logic of first cleaning his inner man before the outer man (Matt 23:26), he is incapable of doing it. This incapacity results from a lack of good desire, not the psychological capacity of inclination and choice in general. As Jesus rhetorically asked, “You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak

³⁴ Though Cunningham agrees with Edwards’ *Freedom of Will*, he laments that this treatise has taken eyes off of the biblical doctrine of man’s slavery to sin and focused them on a philosophy. This preoccupation with psychological necessity has given the impression “that the maintenance of some of the leading and peculiar doctrines of Christianity is most intimately connected with, or rather dependent upon, the establishment of certain philosophical theories” (*ibid.*, p. 516).

³⁵ Edwards, *Freedom of Will*, p. 7.

³⁶ This generalization is more complex for believers, who though they are renewed in their inner man nonetheless retain their sinful flesh until death. They can paradoxically be said to be both slaves to God in their mind and slaves to sin in their flesh (Rom 7:25). However, since the sin is an abnormality and not what they really are in their renewed heart, the Bible often generalizes in stating that “no one who is born of God sins” (e.g. 1 John 5:18; cf. 3:6-10). The actions of believers adds confirmation to our observations regarding Adam’s sin. We are too ignorant to offer any theory of human causation within the heart which can adequately explain all our human agency. Does not Paul caution us, when he says, “For that which I am doing, I do not understand” (Rom 7:15)? The two effective principles (“laws”) at work in believers constrain our actions is ways that sometimes do not make sense (Rom 7:22-25).

what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart” (Matt 12:24; cf. 6:24; 19:23-26).

Let each man pray, “Sustain me with a willing spirit” (Ps 51:12)!

Once these biblical doctrines are understood, it becomes very easy to see that regeneration precedes every good work that a believer ever does, including initial faith in Christ (1 John 3:9; cf. 2:29; 3:10; 4:7; 5:1, 18).³⁷ God’s divine efficacy internally renews our hearts unto faith in the same radical degree of dependence and drama as a man being raised from death to life (Eph 1:19). Though we cannot predict nor direct the sovereign Spirit’s work of renewal, we see the effects (John 3:8). After this solo work of God, every subsequent work arising from our renewed hearts is nonetheless still the work of God as well (Phil 2:13).³⁸

CONCLUSION

God’s creation is marvelous! Just creating matter is amazing. Creating life is even more astounding. But the creation of will, in creatures who are made in His image, is just quintessentially *divine*. And the consideration that every free action of man is both his own responsibility and the subtle manifestation of the secret appointment of God calls for great worship and humility. “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is too high, I cannot attain to it” (Ps 139:6).

³⁷ Given the fact that John 1:12-13 predicates becoming a child of God on receiving Christ and then cites regeneration, it may be more biblically accurate to ascribe initial faith to divine *calling*, which is a sovereign and divine action that causes faith (cf. Rom 4:17; 8:30; 9:7, 11, 24; 1 Cor. 1:26-31).

³⁸ Augustine loved to cite this principle. For example, he writes, “Forasmuch as in beginning He works in us that we may have the will, and in perfecting works with us when we have the will... He operates, therefore, without us, in order that we may will; but when we will, and so will that we may act, He co-operates with us. We can, however, ourselves do nothing to effect good works of piety without Him either working that we may will, or co-working when we will” (Augustine, *On Grace and Free Will*, 33, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 5:458).

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