God's Providence[1]

If God controls all things, how can our actions have real meaning? What are the decrees of God?

EXPLANATION AND SCRIPTURAL BASIS

Once we understand that God is the all-powerful Creator (see chapter 15), it seems reasonable to conclude that he also preserves and governs everything in the universe as well. Though the term *providence* is not found in Scripture, it has been traditionally used to summarize God's ongoing relationship to his creation. When we accept the biblical doctrine of providence, we avoid four common errors in thinking about God's relationship to creation. The biblical doctrine is not *deism* (which teaches that God created the world and then essentially abandoned it), nor *pantheism* (which teaches that the creation does not have a real, distinct existence in itself, but is only part of God), but *providence* which teaches that though God is actively related to and involved in the creation at each moment, creation is distinct from him. Moreover, the biblical doctrine does not teach that events in creation are determined by *chance* (or randomness), nor are they determined by impersonal *fate* (or determinism), but by God, who is the personal yet infinitely powerful Creator and Lord.

We may define God's providence as follows: *God is continually involved with all created things in such a way that he (1) keeps them existing and maintaining the properties with which he created them; (2) cooperates with created things in every action, directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do; and (3) directs them to fulfill his purposes.*

Under the general category of providence we have three subtopics, according to the three elements in the definition above: (1) Preservation, (2) Concurrence, and (3) Government.

We shall examine each of these separately, then consider differing views and objections to the doctrine of providence. It should be noted that this is a doctrine on which there has been substantial disagreement among Christians since the early history of the church, particularly with respect to God's relationship to the willing choices of moral creatures. In this chapter we will first present a summary of the position favored in this textbook (what is commonly called the "Reformed" or "Calvinist" position),[1] then consider arguments that have been made from another position (what is commonly called the "Arminian" position).

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[1] Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology : An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 1994). 315–333.

[1] Though philosophers may use the term *determinism* (or *soft determinism*) to categorize the position I advocate in this chapter, I do not use that term because it is too easily misunderstood in everyday English: (1) It suggests a system in which human choices are not real and make no difference in the outcome of events; and (2) it suggests a system in which the ultimate cause of events is a mechanistic universe rather than a wise and personal God. Moreover, (3) it too easily allows critics to group the biblical view with non-Christian deterministic systems and blur the distinctions between them.

The view advocated in this chapter is also sometimes called "compatibilism," because it holds that absolute divine sovereignty is compatible with human significance and real human choices. I have no objection to the nuances of this term, but I have decided not to use it because (1) I want to avoid the proliferation of technical terms in studying theology, and (2) it seems preferable simply to call my position a traditional Reformed view of God's providence, and thereby to place myself within a widely understood theological tradition represented by John Calvin and the other systematic theologians listed in the "Reformed" category at the end of this chapter.

A. Preservation

God keeps all created things existing and maintaining the properties with which he created them.

Hebrews 1:3 tells us that Christ is "upholding the universe by his word of power." The Greek word translated "upholding" is φέρω (G5770) "carry, bear." This is commonly used in the New Testament for carrying something from one place to another, such as bringing a paralyzed man on a bed to Jesus (Luke 5:18), bringing wine to the steward of the feast (John 2:8), or bringing a cloak and books to Paul (2 Tim. 4:13). It does not mean simply "sustain," but has the sense of active, purposeful control over the thing being carried from one place to another. In Hebrews 1:3, the use of the present participle indicates that Jesus is "*continually* carrying along all things" in the universe by his word of power. Christ is actively involved in the work of providence.

Similarly, in Colossians 1:17, Paul says of Christ that "in him all things hold together." The phrase "all things" refers to every created thing in the universe (see v. 16), and the verse affirms that Christ keeps all things existing—in him they continue to exist or "endure" (NASB mg.). Both verses indicate that if Christ were to cease his continuing activity of sustaining all things in the universe, then all except the triune God would instantly cease to exist. Such teaching is also affirmed by Paul when he says, "In him we live and move and *have our being*" (Acts 17:28), and by Ezra: "You are the LORD, you alone; you have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; *and you preserve all of them*; and the host of heaven worships you" (Neh. 9:6). Peter also says that "the heavens and earth that now exist" are "being *kept* until the day of judgment" (2 Peter 3:7).

One aspect of God's providential preservation is the fact that he continues to give us breath each moment. Elihu in his wisdom says of God, "If he should take back his spirit to himself, and gather to himself his breath, all flesh would perish together, and man would return to dust" (Job 34:14–15; cf. Ps. 104:29).

God, in preserving all things he has made, also causes them to maintain the properties with which he created them. God preserves water in such a way that it continues to act like water. He causes grass to continue to act like grass, with all its distinctive characteristics. He causes the paper on which this sentence is written to continue to act like paper so that it does not spontaneously dissolve into water and float away or change into a living thing and begin to grow! Until it is acted on by some other part of creation and thereby its properties are changed (for instance, until it is burned with fire and it becomes ash), this paper will continue to act like paper so long as God preserves the earth and the creation that he has made.

We should not, however, think of God's preservation as a continuous new creation: he does not continuously create new atoms and molecules for every existing thing every moment. Rather, he *preserves* what has already been created: he "carries along all things" by his word of power (Heb. 1:3, author's translation). We must also appreciate that created things are *real* and that their characteristics are *real*. I do not just imagine that the rock in my hand is hard—it is hard. If I bump it against my head, I do not just imagine that it hurts—it *does* hurt! Because God keeps this rock maintaining the properties with which he created it, the rock has been hard since the day it was formed, and (unless something else in creation interacts with it and changes it) it will be hard until the day God destroys the heavens and the earth (2 Peter 3:7, 10–12).

God's providence provides a basis for science: God has made and continues to sustain a universe that acts in predictable ways. If a scientific experiment gives a certain result today, then we can have confidence that (if all the factors are the same) it will give the same result tomorrow and a hundred years from tomorrow. The doctrine of providence also provides a foundation for technology: I can be confident that gasoline will make my car run today just as it did yesterday, not simply because "it has always worked that way," but because God's providence sustains a universe in which created things maintain the properties with which he created them. The *result* may be similar in the life of an unbeliever and the life of a Christian: we both put gasoline in our cars and drive away. But he will do so without knowing the ultimate reason why it works that way, and I will do so with knowledge of the actual final reason (God's providence) and with thanks to my Creator for the wonderful creation that he has made and preserves.

B. Concurrence

God cooperates with created things in every action, directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do.

This second aspect of providence, *concurrence* is an expansion of the idea contained in the first aspect, *preservation*. In fact, some theologians (such as John Calvin) treat the fact of concurrence under the category of preservation, but it is helpful to treat it as a distinct category.

In Ephesians 1:11 Paul says that God "accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will." The word translated "accomplishes" (ἐνεργέω, G1919) indicates that God "works" or "brings about" *all things* according to his own will. No event in creation falls outside of his providence. Of course this fact is hidden from our eyes unless we read it in Scripture. Like preservation, God's work of concurrence is not clearly evident from observation of the natural world around us.

In giving scriptural proof for concurrence, we will begin with the inanimate creation, then move to animals, and finally to different kinds of events in the life of human beings.

1. Inanimate Creation. There are many things in creation that we think of as merely "natural" occurrences. Yet Scripture says that God causes them to happen. We read of "fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command!" (Ps. 148:8). Similarly,

To the *snow* he says, "Fall on the earth";
    and to the shower and the *rain* "Be strong." …
By the breath of God *ice* is given,
    and the broad waters are frozen fast.
He loads the thick cloud with moisture;
    the clouds scatter his *lightning*.
They turn round and round by his guidance,
    to accomplish all that he commands them
    on the face of the habitable world.
Whether for correction, or for his land,
    or for love, he causes it to happen. (Job 37:6–13; cf. similar statements in 38:22–30)

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Again, the psalmist declares that "Whatever the LORD pleases he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps" (Ps. 135:6), and then in the next sentence he illustrates God's doing of his will in the weather: "He it is who makes the clouds rise at the end of the earth, who makes lightnings for the rain and brings forth the wind from his storehouses" (Ps. 135:7; cf. 104:4).

God also causes the grass to grow: "*You cause the grass to grow* for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth" (Ps. 104:14). God directs the stars in the heavens, asking Job, "Can you bring forth the constellations in their seasons or lead out the Bear with its cubs?" (Job 38:32 NIV; "the Bear" or Ursa Major is commonly called the Big Dipper; v. 31 refers to the constellations Pleiades and Orion). Moreover, God continually directs the coming of the morning (Job 38:12), a fact Jesus affirmed when he said that God "*makes his sun rise* on the evil and on the good, and *sends rain* on the just and on the unjust" (Matt. 5:45).

2. Animals. Scripture affirms that God feeds the wild animals of the field, for, "These all look to you, to give them their food in due season. When you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. When you hide your face, they are dismayed" (Ps. 104:27–29; cf. Job 38:39–41). Jesus also affirmed this when he said, "Look at the *birds* of the air … your heavenly Father *feeds them*" (Matt. 6:26). And he said that not one sparrow "will fall to the ground without your Father's will" (Matt. 10:29).

3. Seemingly "Random" or "Chance" Events. From a human perspective, the casting of lots (or its modern equivalent, the rolling of dice or flipping of a coin) is the most typical of random events that occur in the universe. But Scripture affirms that the outcome of such an event is from God: "The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is wholly from the LORD" (Prov. 16:33).[2]

4. Events Fully Caused by God and Fully Caused by the Creature as Well. For any of these foregoing events (rain and snow, grass growing, sun and stars, the feeding of animals, or casting of lots), we could (at least in theory) give a completely satisfactory "natural" explanation. A botanist can detail the factors that cause grass to grow, such as sun, moisture, temperature, nutrients in the soil, etc. Yet Scripture says that *God* causes the grass to grow. A meteorologist can give a complete explanation of factors that cause rain (humidity, temperature, atmospheric pressure, etc.), and can even produce rain in a weather laboratory. Yet Scripture says that *God* causes the rain. A physicist with accurate information on the force and direction a pair of dice was rolled could fully explain what caused the dice to give the result they did—yet Scripture says that *God* brings about the decision of the lot that is cast.

This shows us that it is incorrect for us to reason that if we know the "natural" cause of something in this world, then God did not cause it. Rather, if it rains we should thank him. If crops grow we should thank him. In all of these events, it is not as though the event was partly caused by God and partly by factors in the created world. If that were the case, then we would always be looking for some small feature of an event that we could not explain and attribute that (say 1 percent of the cause) to God. But surely this is not a correct view. Rather, these passages

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[2] [2] It is true that Eccl. 9:11 says that "the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the men of skill; but time and *chance* happen to them all." But Michael Eaton correctly observes, "On the lips of an Israelite 'chance' means what is unexpected, not what is random" (*Ecclesiastes* TOTC [Leicester and Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1983], p. 70). The rare word here translated "chance" (Heb., פֶּגַע, H7004) occurs only once more in the Bible (1 Kings 5:4[18], of an evil *event*).

affirm that such events are entirely caused by God. Yet we know that (in another sense) they are entirely caused by factors in the creation as well.

The doctrine of concurrence affirms that God *directs*, and *works through* the distinctive properties of each created thing, so that these things themselves bring about the results that we see. In this way it is possible to affirm that in one sense events are fully (100 percent) caused by God and fully (100 percent) caused by the creature as well. However, divine and creaturely causes work in different ways. The divine cause of each event works as an invisible, behind-the-scenes, directing cause and therefore could be called the "primary cause" that plans and initiates everything that happens. But the created thing brings about actions in ways consistent with the creature's own properties, ways that can often be described by us or by professional scientists who carefully observe the processes. These creaturely factors and properties can therefore be called the "secondary" causes of everything that happens, even though they are the causes that are evident to us by observation.

5. The Affairs of Nations. Scripture also speaks of God's providential control of human affairs. We read that God "makes nations great, and he destroys them: he enlarges nations, and leads them away" (Job 12:23). "Dominion belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations" (Ps. 22:28). He has determined the time of existence and the place of every nation on the earth, for Paul says, "he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation" (Acts 17:26; cf. 14:16). And when Nebuchadnezzar repented, he learned to praise God,

> For his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
> and his kingdom endures from generation to generation;
> all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing;
> and *he does according to his will in the host of heaven*
> *and among the inhabitants of the earth*;
> and none can stay his hand or say to him,
> "What are you doing?" (Dan. 4:34–35)

6. All Aspects of Our Lives. It is amazing to see the extent to which Scripture affirms that God brings about various events in our lives. For example, our dependence on God to give us food each day is affirmed every time we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matt. 6:11), even though we work for our food and (as far as mere human observation can discern) obtain it through entirely "natural" causes. Similarly, Paul, looking at events with the eye of faith, affirms that "my God will supply every need" of his children (Phil 4:19), even though God may use "ordinary" means (such as other people) to do so.

God plans our days before we are born, for David affirms, "In your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them" (Ps. 139:16). And Job says that man's "days are determined, and the number of his months is with you, and you have appointed his bounds that he cannot pass" (Job 14:5). This can be seen in the life of Paul, who says that God "had set me apart before I was born" (Gal. 1:15), and Jeremiah, to whom God said, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations" (Jer. 1:5).

All our actions are under God's providential care, for "in him we live and *move*" (Acts 17:28). The individual steps we take each day are directed by the Lord. Jeremiah confesses, "I know, O LORD, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his

steps" (Jer. 10:23). We read that "a man's steps are ordered by the LORD" (Prov. 20:24), and that "a man's mind plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps" (Prov. 16:9). Similarly, Proverbs 16:1 affirms, "The plans of the mind belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the LORD."[3]

Success and failure come from God, for we read, "For not from the east or from the west and not from the wilderness comes lifting up; but it is God who executes judgment, putting down one and lifting up another" (Ps. 75:6–7). So Mary can say, "He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree" (Luke 1:52). The LORD gives children, for children "are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward" (Ps. 127:3).

All our talents and abilities are from the Lord, for Paul can ask the Corinthians, "What have you that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?" (1 Cor. 4:7). David knew that to be true regarding his military skill, for, though he must have trained many hours in the use of a bow and arrow, he could say of God, "He trains my hands for war, so that my arms can bend a bow of bronze" (Ps. 18:34).

God influences rulers in their decisions, for "the king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will" (Prov. 21:1). An illustration of this was when the Lord "turned the heart of the king of Assyria" to his people, "so that he aided them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel" (Ezr. 6:22), or when "the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia" (Ezr. 1:1) to help the people of Israel. But it is not just the heart of the king that God influences, for he looks down "on all the inhabitants of the earth" and "fashions the hearts of them all" (Ps. 33:14–15). When we realize that the heart in Scripture is the location of our inmost thoughts and desires, this is a significant passage. God especially guides the desires and inclinations of believers, working in us "both *to will* and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13).

All of these passages, reporting both general statements about God's work in the lives of all people and specific examples of God's work in the lives of individuals, lead us to conclude that God's providential work of concurrence extends to all aspects of our lives. Our words, our steps, our movements, our hearts, and our abilities are all from the Lord.

But we must guard against misunderstanding. Here also, as with the lower creation, God's providential direction as an unseen, behind-the-scenes, "primary cause," should not lead us to deny the reality of our choices and actions. Again and again Scripture affirms that we really do *cause* events to happen. We are significant and we are responsible. We *do have choices* and these are real choices that bring about real results. Scripture repeatedly affirms these truths as well. Just as a rock is *really hard* because God has made it with the property of hardness, just as water is *really wet* because God has made it with the property of wetness, just as plants are *really alive* because God has made them with the property of life, so our choices are *real choices* and do have significant effects, because God has made us in such a wonderful way that he has endowed us with the property of willing choice.

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[3] [3] David J.A. Clines, "Predestination in the Old Testament," in *Grace Unlimited* ed. by Clark H. Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1975), pp. 116–17, objects that these verses simply affirm that "when it comes to conflict between God and man, undoubtedly it cannot be man who wins the day." He says that these verses do not describe life in general, but describe unusual situations where God overcomes man's will in order to bring about his special purposes. Clines denies that these verses mean that God always acts this way or that these verses represent God's control of human conduct generally. Yet no such restriction is seen in these passages (see Prov. 16:1, 9). The verses do not say that God directs a man's steps in rare instances where God needs to intervene to fulfill his purposes; they simply make general statements about the way the world works—God directs man's steps in general, not simply when there is conflict between God and man.

One approach to these passages about God's concurrence is to say that if our choices are real, they *cannot* be caused by God (see below for further discussion of this viewpoint). But the number of passages that affirm this providential control of God is so considerable, and the difficulties involved in giving them some other interpretation are so formidable, that it does not seem to me that this can be the right approach to them. It seems better to affirm that God causes all things that happen, but that he does so in such a way that he somehow upholds our ability to make *willing, responsible choices* choices that have *real and eternal results* and for which we are *held accountable*. Exactly how God combines his providential control with our willing and significant choices, Scripture does not explain to us. But rather than deny one aspect or the other (simply because we cannot explain how both can be true), we should accept both in an attempt to be faithful to the teaching of all of Scripture.

The analogy of an author writing a play may help us to grasp how both aspects can be true. In the Shakespearean play *Macbeth* the character Macbeth murders King Duncan. Now (if we assume for a moment that this is a fictional account), we may ask, "Who killed King Duncan?" On one level, the correct answer is "Macbeth." Within the play, he carried out the murder and he is rightly to blame for it. But on another level, a correct answer to the question, "Who killed King Duncan?" would be "William Shakespeare caused his death": he wrote the play, he created all the characters in it, and he wrote the part where Macbeth killed King Duncan.

It would not be correct to say that because Macbeth killed King Duncan, William Shakespeare did not (somehow) cause his death. Nor would it be correct to say that because William Shakespeare caused King Duncan's death, Macbeth did not kill him. Both are true. On the level of the characters in the play Macbeth fully (100%) caused King Duncan's death, but on the level of the creator of the play, William Shakespeare fully (100%) caused King Duncan's death. In similar fashion, we can understand that God fully causes things in one way (as Creator), and we fully cause things in another way (as creatures). (One word of caution however: The analogy of an author (= writer, creator) of a play should not lead us to say that God is the "author" (= actor, doer, an older sense of "author") of sin, for he never does sinful actions, nor does he ever delight in them.) [4]

Of course, characters in a play are not real persons—they are fictional characters. But God is infinitely greater and wiser than we are. While we can only create *fictional* characters in a play, our almighty God has created us as *real* persons who make willing choices. To say that God could not make a world in which he (somehow) *causes us to make willing choices* (as some would argue today; see discussion below), is limiting the power of God. It seems also to deny a large number of passages of Scripture.

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[4] I. Howard Marshall, "Predestination in the New Testament" in *Grace Unlimited* by Clark H. Pinnock, pp. 132–33, 139, objects to the analogy of an author and a play because the actors "are bound by the characters assigned to them and the lines that they have learned" so that even if the dramatist "makes [the characters] say 'I love my creator' in his drama, this is not mutual love in the real sense."

But Marshall limits his analysis to what is possible with human beings acting on a human level. He does not give consideration to the possibility (in fact, the reality!) that God is able to do far more than human beings are able to do, and that he can wonderfully create genuine human beings rather than mere characters in a play. A better approach to the analogy of an author and a play would be if Marshall would apply to this question a very helpful statement that he made in another part of the essay: "The basic difficulty is that of attempting to explain the nature of *the relationship between an infinite God and finite creatures*. Our temptation is to think of divine causation in much the same way as human causation, and this produces difficulties as soon as we try to relate divine causation and human freedom. It is beyond our ability to explain how God can cause us to do certain things (or to cause the universe to come into being and to behave as it does)" (pp. 137–38). I can agree fully with everything in Marshall's statement at that point, and find that to be a very helpful way of approaching this problem.

7. What About Evil? If God does indeed cause, through his providential activity, everything that comes about in the world, then the question arises, "What is the relationship between God and evil in the world?" Does God actually cause the evil actions that people do? If he does, then is God not responsible for sin?

In approaching this question, it is best first to read the passages of Scripture that most directly address it. We can begin by looking at several passages that affirm that God did, indeed, cause evil events to come about and evil deeds to be done. But we must remember that in all these passages it is very clear that Scripture nowhere shows God as *directly doing anything evil* but rather as bringing about evil deeds through the willing actions of moral creatures. Moreover, *Scripture never blames God for evil or shows God as taking pleasure in evil* and Scripture never excuses human beings for the wrong they do. However we understand God's relationship to evil, we must *never* come to the point where we think that we are not responsible for the evil that we do, or that God takes pleasure in evil or is to be blamed for it. Such a conclusion is clearly contrary to Scripture.

There are literally dozens of Scripture passages that say that God (indirectly) brought about some kind of evil. I have quoted such an extensive list (in the next few paragraphs) because Christians often are unaware of the extent of this forthright teaching in Scripture. Yet it must be remembered that in all of these examples, the evil is actually done not by God but by people or demons who choose to do it.

A very clear example is found in the story of Joseph. Scripture clearly says that Joseph's brothers were wrongly jealous of him (Gen. 37:11), hated him (Gen. 37:4, 5, 8), wanted to kill him (Gen. 37:20), and did wrong when they cast him into a pit (Gen. 37:24) and then sold him into slavery in Egypt (Gen. 37:28). Yet later Joseph could say to his brothers, "*God sent me before you* to preserve life" (Gen. 45:5), and "You meant evil against me; but *God meant it for good* to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" (Gen. 50:20).[5] Here we have a combination of evil deeds brought about by sinful men who are rightly held accountable for their sin and the overriding providential control of God whereby God's own purposes were accomplished. Both are clearly affirmed.

The story of the exodus from Egypt repeatedly affirms that God hardened the heart of Pharaoh: God says, "I will harden his heart" (Ex. 4:21), "I will harden Pharaoh's heart" (Ex. 7:3), "the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh" (Ex. 9:12), "the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart" (Ex. 10:20, repeated in 10:27 and again in 11:10), "I will harden Pharaoh's heart" (Ex. 14:4), and "the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt" (Ex. 14:8). It is sometimes objected that Scripture also says that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (Ex. 8:15, 32; 9:34), and that God's act of hardening Pharaoh's heart was only in response to the initial rebellion and hardness of heart that Pharaoh himself exhibited of his own free will. But it should be noted that God's promises that he would harden Pharaoh's heart (Ex. 4:21; 7:3) are made long before Scripture tells us that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (we read of this for the first time in Ex. 8:15). Moreover, our analysis of concurrence given above, in which both divine and human agents can cause the same event, should show us that both factors can be true at the same time: even when Pharaoh hardens his own heart, that is not inconsistent with saying that God is causing Pharaoh to do this and thereby God is hardening the heart of Pharaoh. Finally, if someone would object that God is just intensifying the evil desires and choices that were already in Pharaoh's heart, then this kind of action could still in theory at least cover all the evil in the world today, since all people have evil desires in their hearts and all people do in fact make evil choices.

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[5] Ps. 105:17 says that God "had sent a man ahead of them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave."

What was God's purpose in this? Paul reflects on Exodus 9:16 and says, "For the scripture says to Pharaoh, "I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth" ' (Rom. 9:17). Then Paul infers a general truth from this specific example: "So then he has mercy upon whomever he wills, and he hardens the heart of whomever he wills" (Rom. 9:18). In fact, God also hardened the hearts of the Egyptian people so that they pursued Israel into the Red Sea: "I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they shall go in after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen" (Ex. 14:17). This theme is repeated in Psalm 105:25: "He turned their hearts to hate his people."

Later in the Old Testament narrative similar examples are found of the Canaanites who were destroyed in the conquest of Palestine under Joshua. We read, "For it was the LORD's doing to harden their hearts that they should come against Israel in battle, in order that they should be utterly destroyed" (Josh. 11:20; see also Judg. 3:12; 9:23). And Samson's demand to marry an unbelieving Philistine woman "was from the LORD; for he was seeking an occasion against the Philistines. At that time the Philistines had dominion over Israel" (Judg. 14:4). We also read that the sons of Eli, when rebuked for their evil deeds, "would not listen to the voice of their father; for it was the will of the LORD to slay them" (1 Sam. 2:25). Later, "an evil spirit from the LORD" tormented King Saul (1 Sam. 16:14).

When David sinned, the LORD said to him through Nathan the prophet, "I will raise up evil against you out of your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun" (2 Sam. 12:11–12; fulfilled in 16:22). In further punishment for David's sin, "the LORD struck the child that Uriah's wife bore to David, and it became sick" and eventually died (2 Sam. 12:15–18). David remained mindful of the fact that God could bring evil against him, because at a later time, when Shimei cursed David and threw stones at him and his servants (2 Sam. 16:5–8), David refused to take vengeance on Shimei but said to his soldiers, "Let him alone, and let him curse; for the LORD has bidden him" (2 Sam. 16:11).

Still later in David's life, the Lord "incited"[6] David to take a census of the people (2 Sam. 24:1), but afterward David recognized this as sin, saying, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done" (2 Sam. 24:10), and God sent punishment on the land because of this sin (2 Sam. 24:12–17). However, it is also clear that "the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel" (2 Sam. 24:1), so God's inciting of David to sin was a means by which he brought about punishment on the people of Israel. Moreover, the means by which God incited David is made clear in 1 Chronicles 21:1: "Satan stood up against Israel, and *incited* David to number Israel." In this one incident the Bible gives us a remarkable insight into the three influences that contributed in different ways to one action: God, in order to bring about his purposes, worked through Satan to incite David to sin, but Scripture regards David as being responsible for that sin. Again, after Solomon turned away from the Lord because of his foreign wives, "the LORD raised up an adversary against Solomon, Hadad the Edomite" (1 Kings 11:14), and "God also raised up as an adversary to him, Rezon the son of Eliada" (1 Kings 11:23). These were evil kings raised up by God.

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6 6 The Hebrew word used when 2 Sam. 24:1 says that the Lord *incited* David against Israel is סות, H6077, "to incite, allure, instigate" (BDB, p. 694). It is the same word used in 2 Chron. 21:1 to say that Satan *incited* David to number Israel, in 1 Kings 21:25 to say that Jezebel *incited* Ahab to do evil, in Deut. 13:6(7) to warn against a loved one *enticing* a family member secretly to serve other gods, and in 2 Chron. 18:31 to say that God *moved* the Syrian army to withdraw from Jehoshaphat.

In the story of Job, though the LORD gave Satan permission to bring harm to Job's possessions and children, and though this harm came through the evil actions of the Sabeans and the Chaldeans, as well as a windstorm (Job 1:12, 15, 17, 19), yet Job looks beyond those secondary causes and, with the eyes of faith, sees it all as from the hand of the Lord: "the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; *blessed be the name of the LORD*" (Job 1:21). The Old Testament author follows Job's statement immediately with the sentence, "In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong" (Job 1:22). Job has just been told that evil marauding bands had destroyed his flocks and herds, yet with great faith and patience in adversity, he says, "*The LORD has taken away*." Though he says that the LORD had done this, yet he does not blame God for the evil or say that God had done wrong: he says, "Blessed be the name of the LORD." To *blame* God for evil that he had brought about through secondary agents would have been to sin. Job does not do this, Scripture never does this, and neither should we.

Elsewhere in the Old Testament we read that the Lord "put a lying spirit in the mouth" of Ahab's prophets (1 Kings 22:23) and sent the wicked Assyrians as "the rod of my anger" to punish Israel (Isa. 10:5). He also sent the evil Babylonians, including Nebuchadnezzar, against Israel, saying, "I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants" (Jer. 25:9). Then God promised that later he would punish the Babylonians also: "I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, says the LORD, making the land an everlasting waste" (Jer. 25:12). If there is a deceiving prophet who gives a false message, then the Lord says, "if the prophet be deceived and speak a word, I, the LORD, have deceived that prophet, and I will stretch out my hand against him, and will destroy him from the midst of my people Israel" (Ezek. 14:9, in the context of bringing judgment on Israel for their idolatry). As the culmination of a series of rhetorical questions to which the implied answer is always "no," Amos asks, "Is a trumpet blown in a city, and the people are not afraid? Does evil befall a city, unless the LORD has done it?" (Amos 3:6). There follows a series of natural disasters in Amos 4:6–12, where the LORD reminds the people that he gave them hunger, drought, blight and mildew, locusts, pestilence, and death of men and horses, "yet you did not return to me" (Amos 4:6, 8, 9, 10, 11).

In many of the passages mentioned above, God brings evil and destruction on people in judgment upon their sins: They have been disobedient or have strayed into idolatry, and then the LORD uses evil human beings or demonic forces or "natural" disasters to bring judgment on them. (This is not always said to be the case—Joseph and Job come to mind—but it is often so.) Perhaps this idea of judgment on sin can help us to understand, at least in part, how God can righteously bring about evil events. All human beings are sinful, for Scripture tells us that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). None of us deserves God's favor or his mercy, but only eternal condemnation. Therefore, when God brings evil on human beings, whether to discipline his children, or to lead unbelievers to repentance, or to bring a judgment of condemnation and destruction upon hardened sinners, none of us can charge God with doing wrong. Ultimately all will work in God's good purposes to bring glory to him and good to his people. Yet we must realize that in punishing evil in those who are not redeemed (such as Pharaoh, the Canaanites, and the Babylonians), God is also glorified through the demonstration of his justice, holiness, and power (see Ex. 9:16; Rom. 9:14–24).

Through the prophet Isaiah God says, "I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil:[7] I the LORD do all these things" (Isa. 45:7 KJV; the Hebrew word for "create"

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[7] [7] Other translations render the Hebrew word רַע, H8273, "evil," as "disaster" (NIV) or "woe" (RSV) or "calamity" (NASB), and indeed the word can be used to apply to natural disasters such as these words imply. But it may have a broader application than to

here is   , H1343, the same word used in Gen. 1:1). In Lamentations 3:38 we read, "Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and evil come?"[8] The people of Israel, in a time of heartfelt repentance, cry out to God and say, "O Lᴏʀᴅ, why do you make us err from your ways and harden our heart, so that we fear you not?" (Isa. 63:17).[9]

The life of Jonah is a remarkable illustration of God's concurrence in human activity. The men on board the ship sailing to Tarshish threw Jonah overboard, for Scripture says, "So *they* took up Jonah and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging" (Jonah 1:15). Yet only five verses later Jonah acknowledges God's providential direction in their act, for he says to God, "*You* cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas" (Jonah 2:3). Scripture simultaneously affirms that the men threw Jonah into the sea and that God threw him into the sea. The providential direction of God did not force the sailors to do something against their will, nor were they conscious of any divine influence on them—indeed, they cried to the Lord for forgiveness as they threw Jonah overboard (Jonah 1:14). What Scripture reveals to us, and what Jonah himself realized, was that God was bringing about his plan through the willing choices of real human beings who were morally accountable for their actions. In a way not understood by us and not revealed to us, God *caused* them to make a *willing choice* to do what they did.

The most evil deed of all history, the crucifixion of Christ, was ordained by God—not just the fact that it would occur, but also all the individual actions connected with it. The church at Jerusalem recognized this, for they prayed:

> For truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, *to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place*. (Acts 4:27)

All the actions of all the participants in the crucifixion of Jesus had been "predestined" by God. Yet the apostles clearly attach no moral blame to God, for the actions resulted from the willing choices of sinful men. Peter makes this clear in his sermon at Pentecost: "this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, *you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men*" (Acts 2:23). In one sentence he links God's plan and foreknowledge with the moral blame that attaches to the actions of "lawless men." They were not forced by God to act against their wills; rather, God brought about his plan *through their willing choices* for which they were nevertheless responsible.

In an example similar to the Old Testament account of God sending a lying spirit into the mouth of Ahab's prophets, we read of those who refuse to love the truth, "Therefore God sends upon them a strong delusion, to make them believe what is false, so that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness" (2 Thess. 2:11–12). And Peter

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natural disasters, for the word is an extremely common word used of evil generally: It is used of the tree of the knowledge of good and *evil* (Gen. 2:9), of the *evil* among mankind that brought the judgment of the flood (Gen. 6:5), and of the *evil* of the men of Sodom (Gen. 13:13). It is used to say, "Depart from *evil* and do good" (Ps. 34:14), and to speak of the wrong of those who call *evil* good and good *evil* (Isa. 5:20), and of the sin of those whose "feet run to *evil*" (Isa. 59:7; see also 47:10, 11; 56:2; 57:1; 59:15; 65:12; 66:4). Dozens of other times throughout the Old Testament it refers to moral evil or sin. The contrast with "peace" (שָׁלוֹם, H8934) in the same phrase in Isa. 45:7 might argue that only "calamity" is in view, but not necessarily so, for moral evil and wickedness is certainly also the opposite of the wholeness of God's "shalom" or peace. (In Amos 3:6, רָעָה, H8288, is a different but related word and has a similar range of meanings.) But Isa. 45:7 does not say that God *does evil* (see discussion below).

KJV KJV ᴋᴊᴠ—King James Version (Authorized Version)

8 8 The Hebrew for "evil" here is רָעָה, H8288, as in Amos 3:6.

9 9 Another kind of evil is physical infirmity. With regard to this, the Lord says to Moses, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him dumb, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lᴏʀᴅ?" (Ex. 4:11).

tells his readers that those who oppose them and persecute them, who reject Christ as Messiah, "stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do" (1 Peter 2:8).[10]

8. Analysis of Verses Relating to God and Evil. After looking at so many verses that speak of God's providential use of the evil actions of men and demons, what can we say by way of analysis?

a. God Uses All Things to Fulfill His Purposes and Even Uses Evil for His Glory and for Our Good: Thus, when evil comes into our lives to trouble us, we can have from the doctrine of providence a deeper assurance that "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28 NASB). This kind of conviction enabled Joseph to say to his brothers, "You meant evil against me; but *God meant it for good*" (Gen. 50:20).

We can also realize that God is glorified even in the punishment of evil. Scripture tells us that "the LORD has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble" (Prov. 16:4).[11] Similarly, the psalmist affirms, "Surely the wrath of men shall praise you" (Ps. 76:10). And the example of Pharaoh (Rom. 9:14–24) is a clear example of the way God uses evil for his own glory and for the good of his people.

b. Nevertheless, God Never Does Evil, and Is Never to Be Blamed for Evil: In a statement similar to those cited above from Acts 2:23 and 4:27–28, Jesus also combines God's predestination of the crucifixion with moral blame on those who carry it out: "For the Son of man goes *as it has been determined*; but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed!" (Luke 22:22; cf. Matt. 26:24; Mark 14:21). And in a more general statement about evil in the world, Jesus says, "Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the man by whom the temptation comes!" (Matt. 18:7).

James speaks similarly in warning us not to blame God for the evil we do when he says, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one; but each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire" (James 1:13–14). The verse does not say that God never causes evil; it affirms that we should never think of him as the personal agent who is tempting us or who is to be held accountable for the temptation. We can never blame God for temptation or think that he will approve of us if we give in to it. We are to resist evil and always blame ourselves or others who tempt us, but we must never blame God. Even a verse such as Isaiah 45:7, which speaks of God

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[10] [10] The "destining" in this verse is best taken to refer to both the stumbling and the disobedience. It is incorrect to say that God only destined the fact that those who disobey would stumble, because it is not a fact but persons ("they") who are said to be "destined" in this case. (See discussion in Wayne Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter* TNTC [Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, and Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988], pp. 106–10.)
NASB NASB ɴᴀsʙ—New American Standard Bible
[11] [11] David J.A. Clines, "Predestination in the Old Testament," p. 116, retranslates this, "The Lord has made everything with its counterpart, so the wicked will have his day of doom." He does this in order to avoid the conclusion that the Lord has made some wicked people for the day of evil. But his translation is not convincing. The Hebrew word translated "purpose" in the RSV (מַעֲנֶה, H5102) occurs only eight times in the Old Testament and usually refers to an "answer" to a question or a statement. So it means something like "appropriate response" or "corresponding purpose." But the preposition לְ, H4200, is much more accurately translated "for" (not "with"), so in either case the sentence affirms that the Lord has made everything for its appropriate purpose or the response appropriate to it. Therefore, whether we translate "purpose" or "counterpart," the verse affirms that even the wicked have been made by the Lord "for [Heb. לְ] the day of evil."
cf cf cf.—compare

"creating evil," does not say that God himself *does* evil, but should be understood to mean that God ordained that evil would come about through the willing choices of his creatures.

These verses all make it clear that "secondary causes" (human beings, and angels and demons) are *real* and that human beings do cause evil and are responsible for it. Though God ordained that it would come about, both in general terms and in specific details, yet *God is removed from actually doing evil* and his bringing it about through "secondary causes" does not impugn his holiness or render him blameworthy. John Calvin wisely says:

> Thieves and murderers and other evildoers are the instruments of divine providence, and the Lord himself uses these to carry out the judgments that he has determined with himself. Yet I deny that they can derive from this any excuse for their evil deeds. Why? Will they either involve God in the same iniquity with themselves, or will they cloak their own depravity with his justice? They can do neither.[12]

A little later, Calvin heads a chapter, "God So Uses the Works of the Ungodly, and So Bends Their Minds to Carry Out His Judgments, That He Remains Pure From Every Stain."[13]

We should notice that the alternatives to saying that God *uses evil for his purposes* but that *he never does evil* and is *not to be blamed* for it, are not desirable ones. If we were to say that God himself does evil, we would have to conclude that he is not a good and righteous God, and therefore that he is not really God at all. On the other hand, if we maintain that God does not use evil to fulfill his purposes, then we would have to admit that there is evil in the universe that God did not intend, is not under his control, and might not fulfill his purposes. This would make it very difficult for us to affirm that "all things" work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose (Rom. 8:28). If evil came into the world in spite of the fact that God did not intend it and did not want it to be there, then what guarantee do we have that there will not be more and more evil that he does not intend and that he does not want? And what guarantee do we have that he will be able to use it for his purposes, or even that he can triumph over it? Surely this is an undesirable alternative position.

c. God Rightfully Blames and Judges Moral Creatures for the Evil They Do: Many passages in Scripture affirm this. One is found in Isaiah: "These have *chosen* their own ways, and their soul *delights in* their abominations; I also will choose affliction for them, and bring their fears upon them; because, when I called, no one answered, when I spoke they did not listen; but they did what was evil in my eyes, and *chose* that in which I did not delight" (Isa. 66:3–4). Similarly, we read, "God made man upright, but they have sought out many devices" (Eccl. 7:29). *The blame for evil is always on the responsible creature* whether man or demon, who does it, and *the creature who does evil is always worthy of punishment*. Scripture consistently affirms that God is righteous and just to punish us for our sins. And if we object that he should not find fault with us because we cannot resist his will, then we must ponder the apostle Paul's own response to that question: "You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?' But who are you, a man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me thus?" ' (Rom. 9:19–20). In every case where we do evil, we know that we *willingly* choose to do it, and we realize that we are rightly to be blamed for it.

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[12] [12] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Library of Christian Classics, ed. by John T. McNeill and trans. by F.L. Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:217 (1.16.5).
[13] [13] John Calvin, *Institutes* 1:228 (1.18.title).

d. Evil Is Real, Not an Illusion, and We Should Never Do Evil, for It Will Always Harm Us and Others: Scripture consistently teaches that we never have a right to do evil, and that we should persistently oppose it in ourselves and in the world. We are to pray, "Deliver us from evil" (Matt. 6:13), and if we see anyone wandering from the truth and doing wrong, we should attempt to bring him back. Scripture says, "If any one among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins" (James 5:19–20). We should never even *will* evil to be done, for entertaining sinful desires in our minds is to allow them to "wage war" against our souls (1 Peter 2:11) and thereby to do us spiritual harm. If we are ever tempted to say, "Why not do evil that good may come?" as some people were slanderously charging Paul with teaching, we should remember what Paul says about people who teach that false doctrine: "Their condemnation is just" (Rom. 3:8).

In thinking about God using evil to fulfill his purposes, we should remember that there are things that are *right* for God to do but *wrong* for us to do: He requires others to worship him, and he accepts worship from them. He seeks glory for himself. He will execute final judgment on wrongdoers. He also uses evil to bring about good purposes, but he does not allow us to do so. Calvin quotes a statement of Augustine with approval: "There is a great difference between what is fitting for man to will and what is fitting for God … For through the bad wills of evil men God fulfills what he righteously wills."[14] And Herman Bavinck uses the analogy of a parent who will himself use a very sharp knife but will not allow his child to use it, to show that God himself uses evil to bring about good purposes but never allows his children to do so. Though we are to imitate God's moral character in many ways (cf. Eph. 5:1), this is one of the ways in which we are not to imitate him.

e. In Spite of All of the Foregoing Statements, We Have to Come to the Point Where We Confess That We Do Not Understand How It Is That God Can Ordain That We Carry Out Evil Deeds and Yet Hold Us Accountable for Them and Not be Blamed Himself: We can affirm that all of these things are true, because Scripture teaches them. But Scripture does *not* tell us exactly *how* God brings this situation about or how it can be that God holds us accountable for what he ordains to come to pass. Here Scripture is silent, and we have to agree with Berkhof that ultimately "the problem of God's relation to sin remains a mystery."[15]

9. Are We "Free"? Do We Have "Free Will"? If God exercises providential control over all events are we in any sense free? The answer depends on what is meant by the word *free*. In some senses of the word *free* everyone agrees that we are free in our will and in our choices. Even prominent theologians in the Reformed or Calvinistic tradition concur. Both Louis Berkhof in his *Systematic Theology* (pp. 103, 173) and John Calvin in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*[16]

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[14] [14] John Calvin, *Institutes* 1:234 (1.18.3).

cf cf cf.—compare

[15] [15] Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* p. 175.

[16] [16] *Institutes* 1:296 (2.3.5), quoting St. Bernard with approval: "Among all living beings man alone is free … For what is voluntary is also free." Later in the same passage he quotes St. Bernard with approval again, where he admits that the will is in bondage to sin and therefore sins of necessity, but then says that "this necessity is as it were voluntary … Thus the soul … is at the same time enslaved and free: enslaved because of necessity; free because of will." A little later Calvin himself says that "man, while he sins of necessity, yet sins no less voluntarily" (1:309 [2.4.1]). Calvin clearly says that Adam, before there was sin in the world, "by free will had the power, if he so willed, to attain eternal life … Adam could have stood if he wished, seeing that he fell solely by his own will … His choice of good and evil was free" (1:195 [1.15.8]). So Calvin can use the term *free will* if it means

are willing to speak *in some sense* of the "free" acts and choices of man. However, Calvin explains that the term is so subject to misunderstanding that he himself tries to avoid using it. This is because "free will is not sufficient to enable man to do good works, unless he be helped by grace."[17] Therefore, Calvin concludes:

> Man will then be spoken of as having this sort of free decision, not because he has free choice equally of good and evil, but because he acts wickedly by will, not by compulsion. Well put, indeed, but what purpose is served by labeling with a proud name such a slight thing?

Calvin continues by explaining how this term is easily misunderstood:

> But how few men are there, I ask, who when they hear free will attributed to man do not immediately conceive him to be master of both his own mind and will, able of his own power to turn himself toward either good or evil … If anyone, then, can use this word without understanding it in a bad sense, I shall not trouble him on this account … I'd prefer not to use it myself, and I should like others, if they seek my advice, to avoid it.[18]

Thus, when we ask whether we have "free will," it is important to be clear as to what is meant by the phrase. Scripture nowhere says that we are "free" in the sense of being outside of God's control[19] or of being able to make decisions that are not caused by anything. (This is the sense in which many people seem to assume we must be free; see discussion below.) Nor does it say we are "free" in the sense of being able to do right on our own apart from God's power. But we are nonetheless free in the greatest sense that any creature of God could be free—we make *willing* choices, choices that have *real effects*.[20] We are aware of no restraints on our will from God when we make decisions.[21] We must insist that we have the power of *willing* choice; otherwise we will fall into the error of fatalism or determinism and thus conclude that our choices do not matter, or that we cannot really make willing choices. On the other hand, the kind of freedom that is demanded by those who deny God's providential control of all things, a freedom to be outside of God's sustaining and controlling activity, would be impossible if Jesus Christ is indeed "continually carrying along things by his word of power" (Heb. 1:3, author's translation). If this is true, then to be outside of that providential control would simply be not to exist! An absolute "freedom," totally free of God's control, is simply not possible in a world providentially sustained and directed by God himself.

C. Government

"voluntary, willing," and he can use it of Adam before the fall. Yet he carefully avoids applying the term *free will* to sinful human beings if by it people mean "able to do good in one's own strength" (see text above).

[17] *Institutes* 1:262 (2.2.6).

[18] Ibid., 1:264, 266 (2.2.7–8).

[19] In fact, our ability to make willing choices at all is simply a created reflection of God's will and his ability to make willing choices. However, if we were to be *totally* free in our choices, we would be equal to God in our will, and that is something we may never expect either in this life or in the one to come.

[20] Arminian theologians dissent from this understanding of free will and argue for a freedom that means our decisions are not caused by anything outside ourselves (see discussion of Jack Cottrell's objection that freedom must mean more than willing choices on pp. 340–47, below).

[21] John Feinberg says, "If the act is according to the agent's *desires* then even though the act is causally determined, it is free and the agent is morally responsible" ("God Ordains All Things," in *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom* ed. by David Basinger and Randall Basinger [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986], p. 37).

1. Scriptural Evidence. We have discussed the first two aspects of providence, (1) preservation and (2) concurrence. This third aspect of God's providence indicates that *God has a purpose in all that he does in the world and he providentially governs or directs all things in order that they accomplish his purposes*. We read in the Psalms, "His kingdom rules over all" (Ps. 103:19). Moreover, "he does according to his will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What are you doing?" ' (Dan. 4:35). Paul affirms that "from him and through him and to him are all things" (Rom. 11:36), and that "God has put all things in subjection under his feet" (1 Cor. 15:27). God is the one who "accomplishes *all things* according to the counsel of his will" (Eph. 1:11), so that ultimately "at the name of Jesus" every knee will bow "in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:10–11). It is because Paul knows that God is sovereign over all and works his purposes in every event that happens that he can declare that "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28 NASB).

2. Distinctions Concerning the Will of God. Though *in God* his will is unified, and not divided or contradictory, we cannot begin to understand the depths of God's will, and only in a small part is it revealed to us. For this reason, as we saw in chapter 13,[22] two aspects of God's will appear to us. On the one hand, there is God's *moral will* (sometimes called his "revealed" will). This includes the moral standards of Scripture, such as the Ten Commandments and the moral commands of the New Testament. God's moral commands are given as descriptions of how *we* should conduct ourselves if we would act rightly before him. On the other hand, another aspect of God's will is his *providential government* of all things (sometimes called his "secret will"). This includes all the events of history that God has ordained to come about, for example, the fact that Christ would be crucified by "lawless men" (Acts 2:23). It also includes all the other evil acts that were mentioned in the preceding section.

   Some have objected to this distinction between two aspects of the will of God, arguing that it means there is a "self-contradiction" in God.[23] However, even in the realm of human experience, we know that we can will and carry out something that is painful and that we do not desire (such as punishing a disobedient child or getting an inoculation that temporarily makes us ill) in order to bring about a long-term result that we desire more than the avoidance of short-term pain (to bring about the obedience of the child, for example, or to prevent us from getting a more serious illness). And God is infinitely greater and wiser than we are. Certainly it is possible for him to will that his creatures do something that in the short term displeases him in order that in the long term he would receive the greater glory. To say that this is a "self-contradiction" in God is to fail to understand the distinctions that have been made so that this explanation is not contradictory.[24]

D. The Decrees of God

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[22] [22] See pp. 213–16 for a further discussion of God's secret and revealed will.

[23] [23] This is the objection of I. Howard Marshall, "Predestination in the New Testament," p. 173.

[24] [24] John Calvin says of those who object to two senses of the will of God, "Let them tell me, I pray, whether he exercises his judgments willingly or unwillingly … When we do not grasp how God wills to take place what he forbids to be done, let us recall our mental incapacity." He also quotes with approval the statement of Augustine: "There is a great difference between what is fitting for man to will and what is fitting for God … for through the bad wills of evil men God fulfills what he righteously wills" (*Institutes* 1:233–34 [1.18.3]).

The decrees of God are *the eternal plans of God whereby, before the creation of the world, he determined to bring about everything that happens*. This doctrine is similar to the doctrine of providence, but here we are thinking about God's decisions *before the world was created* rather than his providential actions in time. His providential actions are the outworking of the eternal decrees that he made long ago. (See chapter 2, p. 47, for "decree" used in a somewhat different sense.)

David confesses, "in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them" (Ps. 139:16; cf. Job 14:5: the days, months, and bounds of man are determined by God). There was also a "definite *plan* and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23) by which Jesus was put to death, and the actions of those who condemned and crucified him were "predestined" (Acts 4:28) by God. Our salvation was determined long ago because God "chose us in him (Christ) *before the foundation of the world* that we should be holy and blameless before him" (Eph. 1:4). Our good works as believers are those "which God *prepared beforehand* that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10; cf. Jude 4).

These examples take in many diverse aspects of human activity. It seems appropriate to conclude from these examples that all that God does he has planned before the creation of the world—in fact, these things have been an *eternal plan* with him. The benefit of an emphasis on God's decrees is that it helps us to realize that God does not make up plans suddenly as he goes along. He knows the end from the beginning, and he will accomplish all his good purposes. This should greatly increase our trust in him, especially in difficult circumstances.

E. The Importance of Our Human Actions

We may sometimes forget that God works *through human actions* in his providential management of the world. If we do, then we begin to think that our actions and our choices do not make much difference or do not have much effect on the course of events. To guard against any misunderstanding of God's providence we make the following points of emphasis.

1. We Are Still Responsible for Our Actions. God has made us *responsible* for our actions, which have *real and eternally significant results*. In all his providential acts God will preserve these characteristics of responsibility and significance.

Some analogies from the natural world might help us understand this. God has created a rock with the characteristic of being *hard* and so it is. God has created water with the characteristic of being *wet* and so it is. God has created plants and animals with the characteristic of being *alive* and so they are. Similarly, God has created us with the characteristic of being *responsible for our actions* and so we are! If we do right and obey God, he will reward us and things will go well with us both in this age and in eternity. If we do wrong and disobey God, he will discipline and perhaps punish us, and things will go ill with us. The realization of these facts will help us have pastoral wisdom in talking to others and in encouraging them to avoid laziness and disobedience.

The fact that we are responsible for our actions means that we should never begin to think, "God made me do evil, and therefore I am not responsible for it." Significantly, Adam began to make excuses for the very first sin in terms that sounded suspiciously like this: "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate" (Gen. 3:12). Unlike Adam, Scripture *never* blames God for sin. If we ever begin to *think* that God is to blame for sin, we have thought *wrongly* about God's providence, for it is always the creature, not God who is

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to be blamed. Now we may object that it is not right for God to hold us responsible if he has in fact ordained all things that happen, but Paul corrects us: "You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?' But who are you, a man, to answer back to God?" (Rom. 9:19–20). We must realize and settle in our hearts that it is *right* for God to rebuke and discipline and punish evil. And, when we are responsible to do so, it is right for us to rebuke and discipline evil in our families, in the church, and even, in some ways, in the society around us. We should never say about an evil event, "God willed it and therefore it is good," because we must recognize that some things that God's will of decree has planned are not in themselves good, and should not receive our approval, just as they do not receive God's approval.

2. Our Actions Have Real Results and Do Change the Course of Events. In the ordinary working of the world, if I neglect to take care of my health and have poor eating habits, or if I abuse my body through alcohol or tobacco, I am likely to die sooner. God has ordained that our *actions* do have effects. God has ordained that *events* will come about *by our causing them*. Of course, we do not know what God has planned even for the rest of this day, to say nothing of next week or next year. But we *do* know that if we trust God and obey him, we will discover that he has planned *good things* to come about through that obedience! We cannot simply disregard others whom we meet, for God brings many people across our paths and gives *us* the responsibility to act toward them in eternally significant ways—whether for good or ill.

Calvin wisely notes that to encourage us to use ordinary caution in life and to plan ahead, "God is pleased to hide all future events from us, in order that we should resist them as doubtful, and not cease to oppose them with ready remedies, until they are either overcome or pass beyond all care … God's providence does not always meet us in its naked form, but God in a sense clothes it with the means employed."[25]

By contrast, if we anticipate that some dangers or evil events may come in the future, and if we do not use reasonable means to avoid them, then we may in fact discover that our lack of action was the means that God used to allow them to come about!

3. Prayer Is One Specific Kind of Action That Has Definite Results and That Does Change the Course of Events. God has also ordained that prayer is a very significant means of bringing about results in the world.[26] When we earnestly intercede for a specific person or situation, we will often find that God had ordained that our prayer would be a *means* he would use to bring about the changes in the world. Scripture reminds us of this when it tells us, "You do not have, because you do not ask" (James 4:2). Jesus says, "Hitherto you have asked nothing in my name; ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full" (John 16:24).

4. In Conclusion, We Must Act! The doctrine of providence in no way encourages us to sit back in idleness to await the outcome of certain events. Of course, God may impress on us the need to wait on him before we act and to trust in him rather than in our own abilities—that is certainly not wrong. But simply to say that we are trusting in God *instead of* acting responsibly is sheer laziness and is a distortion of the doctrine of providence.

In practical terms, if one of my sons has school work that must be done the next day, I am right to make him complete that work before he can go out to play. I realize that his grade is in God's hands, and that God has long ago determined what it would be, but I do not know what it

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[25] [25] John Calvin, *Institutes* 1:216 (1.17.4).
[26] [26] See chapter 18 for a more extensive discussion of prayer.

will be, and neither does he. What I do know is that if he studies and does his school work faithfully, he will receive a good grade. If he doesn't, he will not. So Calvin can say:

> Now it is very clear what our duty is: Thus, if the Lord has committed to us the protection of our life, our duty is to protect it; if he offers helps to us, to use them; if he forewarns us of dangers, not to plunge headlong; if he makes remedies available, not to neglect them. But no danger will hurt us, say they, unless it is fatal, and in this case it is beyond remedies. But what if the dangers are not fatal, because the Lord has provided you with remedies for repulsing and overcoming them?[27]

One good example of vigorous activity combined with trust in God is found in 2 Samuel 10:12, where Joab says, "*Be strong* and let us show ourselves courageous for the sake of our people and for the cities of our God," but then adds immediately in the same sentence, "*and may the Lord do what is good in His sight*" (NASB). Joab will both fight and trust God to do what he thinks to be good.

Similar examples are found in the New Testament. When Paul was in Corinth, in order to keep him from being discouraged about the opposition he had received from the Jews, the Lord appeared to him one night in a vision and said to him, "Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man shall attack you to harm you; for *I have many people in this city*" (Acts 18:9–10). If Paul had been a fatalist with an improper understanding of God's providence, he would have listened to God's words, "I have many people in this city," and concluded that God had determined to save many of the Corinthians, and that therefore it did not matter whether Paul stayed there or not: God had already chosen many people to be saved! Paul would have thought that he may as well pack his bags and leave! But Paul does not make that mistake. He rather concludes that if God has chosen many people, then it will probably be through the *means* of Paul's preaching the gospel that those many people would be saved. Therefore Paul makes a wise decision: "*And he stayed a year and six months* teaching the word of God among them" (Acts 18:11).

Paul put this kind of responsible action in the light of God's providence into a single sentence in 2 Timothy 2:10, where he said, "I endure everything *for the sake of the elect* that they also may obtain salvation in Christ Jesus with its eternal glory." He did not argue from the fact that God had chosen some to be saved that nothing had to be done; rather, he concluded that *much* had to be done in order that God's purposes might come about by the *means* that God had also established. Indeed, Paul was willing to endure "everything," including all kinds of hardship and suffering, that God's eternal plans might come about. A hearty belief in God's providence is not a discouragement but a spur to action.

A related example is found in the story of Paul's journey to Rome. God had clearly revealed to Paul that no one on the ship would die from the long storm they had endured. Indeed, Paul stood before the passengers and crew and told them to take heart,

> for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For this very night there stood by me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, "Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and lo, God has granted you all those who sail with you." So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. But we shall have to run on some island. (Acts 27:22–26)

But shortly after Paul had said this, he noticed that the sailors on board the ship were secretly trying to lower a lifeboat into the sea, "seeking to escape from the ship" (Acts 27:30). They were planning to leave the others helpless with no one who knew how to sail the ship. When Paul saw this, he did not adopt an erroneous, fatalistic attitude, thinking that God would miraculously get the ship to shore. Rather, he immediately went to the centurion who was in charge of the sailors and "Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved" ' (Acts 27:31). Wisely, Paul knew that God's providential oversight and even his clear prediction of what would happen still involved the use of ordinary human *means* to bring it about. He was even so bold to say that those means were *necessary*: "Unless these men stay in the ship, *you cannot be saved*" (Acts 27:31). We would do well to imitate his example, combining complete trust in God's providence with a realization that the use of ordinary means is necessary for things to come out the way God has planned them to come out.

5. What If We Cannot Understand This Doctrine Fully? Every believer who meditates on God's providence will sooner or later come to a point where he or she will have to say, "I cannot understand this doctrine fully." In some ways that must be said about every doctrine, since our understanding is finite, and God is infinite (see chapter 1, pp. 34–35; cf. p. 150). But particularly is this so with the doctrine of providence: we should believe it because Scripture teaches it even when we do not understand fully how it fits in with other teachings of Scripture. Calvin has some wise advice:

> Let those for whom this seems harsh consider for a little while how bearable their squeamishness is in refusing a thing attested by clear Scriptural proofs because it exceeds their mental capacity, and find fault that things are put forth publicly, which if God had not judged useful for men to know, he would never have bidden his prophets and apostles to teach. For our wisdom ought to be nothing else than to embrace with humble teachableness, and at least without finding fault, whatever is taught in sacred Scripture.[28]

F. Further Practical Application

Although we have already begun to speak of the practical application of this doctrine, three additional points should be made.

1. Do Not Be Afraid, but Trust in God. Jesus emphasizes the fact that our sovereign Lord watches over us and cares for us as his children. He says, "Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? … Therefore do not be anxious, saying, "What shall we eat?' or "What shall we drink?' or "What shall we wear?" ' (Matt. 6:26, 31). If God feeds the birds and clothes the grass of the field, he will take care of us. Similarly, Jesus says, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's will … Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows" (Matt. 10:29–31).

David was able to sleep in the midst of his enemies, because he knew that God's providential control made him "dwell in safety," and he could say, "In peace I will both lie down and sleep" (Ps. 4:8). Many of the psalms encourage us to trust God and not to fear, because the Lord keeps and protects his people—for example, Psalm 91 ("He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High

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[28] [28] *Institutes* 1:237 (1.18.4).

…") or Psalm 121 ("I lift up my eyes to the hills …"). Because of our confidence in God's providential care, we need not fear any evil or harm, even if it does come to us—it can only come by God's will and ultimately for our good. Thus Peter can say that "now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold … may redound to praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:6–7). In all of this we need not worry about the future but trust in God's omnipotent care.

2. Be Thankful for All Good Things That Happen. If we genuinely believe that all good things are caused by God, then our hearts will indeed be full when we say, "Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits" (Ps. 103:2). We will thank him for our daily food (cf. Matt. 6:11; 1 Tim. 4:4–5); indeed, we will "give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thess. 5:18).

3. There Is No Such Thing as "Luck" or "Chance." All things come to pass by God's wise providence. This means that we should adopt a much more "personal" understanding of the universe and the events in it. The universe is not governed by impersonal fate or luck, but by a personal God. Nothing "just happens—we should see God's hand in events throughout the day, causing all things to work together for good for those who love him.

This confidence in God's wise providence certainly does not equal superstition, for that is a belief in impersonal or demonic control of circumstances, or control by a capricious deity concerned for meaningless ritual rather than obedience and faith. A deepened appreciation for the doctrine of providence will not make us more superstitious; it will make us trust in God more and obey him more fully.

G. Another Evangelical View: the Arminian Position

There is a major alternative position held by many evangelicals, which for convenience we shall call the "Arminian" view.[29] Among denominations in contemporary evangelicalism, Methodists and Nazarenes tend to be thoroughly Arminian, whereas Presbyterians and the Christian Reformed tend to be thoroughly Reformed (at least by denominational statement of faith). Both views are found among Baptists, Episcopalians (though the Thirty-Nine Articles have a clearly Reformed emphasis), Dispensationalists, Evangelical Free Churches, Lutherans (though Martin Luther was in the Reformed camp on this issue), the Churches of Christ, and most charismatic and Pentecostal groups (though Pentecostal denominations such as the Assemblies of God have been predominantly Arminian).

Those who hold an Arminian position maintain that in order to preserve the *real human freedom* and *real human choices* that are necessary for genuine human personhood, God cannot cause or plan our voluntary choices. Therefore they conclude that God's providential

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[29] [29] The term *Arminianism* was recently chosen in the title of a responsible series of essays representing this position: See Clark H. Pinnock, ed., *The Grace of God, The Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989). In the following section I quote extensively from this book and from an earlier book edited by Pinnock, *Grace Unlimited*. These two books are excellent recent defenses of the Arminian position.

Jacob Arminius (1560–1609) was a Dutch theologian who differed with the predominant Calvinism of his day. Though he is not personally quoted or referred to very often by Arminians today, his name has become attached to a range of positions that have in common the fact that they differ from the Calvinist position on the question of man's free will, both with respect to God's providence in general (the subject of this chapter) and with respect to predestination or election in specific (the subject of chapter 32).

The term *Arminian* should be distinguished from the term *Armenian* which refers to people who live in or descend from inhabitants of the ancient country of Armenia in western Asia (now part of Turkey, Iran, and the CIS).

involvement in or control of history must *not* include *every specific detail* of every event that happens, but that God instead simply *responds* to human choices and actions as they come about and does so in such a way that his purposes are ultimately accomplished in the world.

Those who hold this position argue that God's purposes in the world are more general and could be accomplished through many different kinds of specific events. So God's purpose or plan for the world "is not a blueprint encompassing all future contingencies" but "a dynamic program for the world, the outworking of which depends in part on man."[30] Cottrell says, "God does not have a specific, unconditional purpose for each discrete particle, object, person, and event within the creation."[31] Arminians believe that God achieves his overall goal by responding to and utilizing the free choices of human beings, whatever they may be.[32] Pinnock says that "predestination does not apply to every individual activity, but is rather the comprehensive purpose of God which is *the structural context* in which history moves."[33]

Moreover, advocates of the Arminian position maintain that God's will cannot include evil. Pinnock says, "The fall of man is an eloquent refutation to the theory that God's will is always done."[34] He states that it "is not the case" that God's will "is also accomplished in the lostness of the lost."[35] And I. Howard Marshall quite clearly affirms, "It is not true that everything that happens is what God desires."[36] These statements make it clear that the differences between the Reformed and Arminian positions are not merely differences in terminology: there is a real disagreement in substance. Several arguments are advanced in defense of the Arminian position. I have attempted to summarize them in the four major points that follow.

1. The Verses Cited as Examples of God's Providential Control Are Exceptions and Do Not Describe the Way That God Ordinarily Works in Human Activity. In surveying the Old Testament passages referring to God's providential involvement in the world, David J.A. Clines says that God's predictions and statements of his purposes refer to limited or specific events:

> Almost all of the specific references to God's plans have in view a particular event or a limited series of events, for example, "his purposes against the land of the Chaldeans" (Jer. 50:45). Furthermore, it is not a matter of a *single* divine plan; various passages speak of various intentions, and some references are in fact to God's plans in the plural … [The passages are] an assertion that within history God is working his purposes out.[37]

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[30] Clark Pinnock, "Responsible Freedom in the Flow of Biblical History," in *Grace Unlimited* p. 18.

[31] Jack Cottrell, "The Nature of the Divine Sovereignty," in *The Grace of God, the Will of Man* p. 107. Cottrell's essay is, in my view, the most comprehensive and persuasive of the many excellent Arminian essays in this book—the book as a whole is responsibly done and is probably the best recent representation of Arminian thinking. Cottrell does not deny divine omniscience regarding future events as do the essays by Clark Pinnock and Richard Rice in the same volume, and this places him closer to the intuitive Arminianism that seems right to many evangelical laypersons today.

[32] I. Howard Marshall claims this at several points in "Predestination in the New Testament," *Grace Unlimited* pp. 127–43. Marshall uses the analogy of a jazz band where individual players can improvise freely but the overall goal and unity of the piece are preserved nonetheless (p. 133). Thus, "the Bible has the picture of a God deciding fresh measures in history and interacting with the wills of men alongside the picture of a God planning things in eternity past, and both pictures are equally valid" (Marshall, p. 141).

[33] Pinnock, "Responsible Freedom," p. 102.

[34] Ibid., p. 102.

[35] Ibid., p. 106.

[36] Marshall, "Predestination in the New Testament," p. 139.

[37] David J.A. Clines, "Predestination in the Old Testament," p. 122; see also pp. 116–17. Similarly, James D. Strauss, "God's Promise and Universal History," *Grace Unlimited* p. 196, says that the example of Jacob and Esau that Paul mentions in Rom. 9:9–13 refers to God's corporate plans for the descendants of Jacob and Esau and should not be taken as an illustration of how God works in people's lives or hearts generally.

Jack Cottrell agrees that in some cases God intervenes in the world in an uncommon way, using "subtle manipulation of such [natural] laws and of mental states." But he calls these unusual events "special providence," and says, "It is natural that the Old Testament teems with accounts of special providence. But we have no reason to assume that God was working in Australia and South America in such ways at the same time."[38]

2. The Calvinist View Wrongly Makes God Responsible for Sin. Those who hold an Arminian position ask, "How can God be holy if he decrees that we sin?" They affirm that God is not the "author of sin," that "God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one" (James 1:13), that "God is light and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5), and that "the LORD is upright … and there is no unrighteousness in him" (Ps. 92:15).

The view of God's providence advocated above, they would say, makes us into puppets or robots who cannot do anything other than what God causes us to do. But this brings moral reproach on God, for Marshall says, "I am responsible for what my agent does."[39] Pinnock affirms that "it is simply blasphemous to maintain, as this theory does, that man's rebellion against God is *in any sense* the product of God's sovereign will or primary causation."[40]

3. Choices Caused by God Cannot Be Real Choices. When the Calvinist claims that God causes us to choose things voluntarily, those who hold an Arminian position would respond that any choices that are ultimately caused by God cannot be real choices, and that, if God really causes us to make the choices we make, then we are not real persons. Cottrell says that the Calvinist view of God as the primary cause and men as secondary causes really breaks down so there is only one cause, God. If a man uses a lever to move a rock, he argues, "the lever is not a true second cause but is only an instrument of the real cause of the movement … In my judgment the concept of cause has no real significance when used in this sense. In such a system man contributes only what has been predetermined."[41]

Pinnock writes:

> Personal fellowship of the kind envisioned in the Gospel only exists where consummated in a free decision. If we wish to understand God's grace as personal address to his creatures, we must comprehend it in dynamic, non-manipulative, non-coercive terms, as the Bible does.[42]

He also says:

> If the world were a completely determined structure on which no decision of man's would have any effect, that basic intuition of man's that he is an *actor* and a *free agent* would be nonsensical: There would then be no point to his making plans or exerting efforts intended to transform the world … Human freedom is the precondition of moral and intellectual responsibility.[43]

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[38] Jack Cottrell, "The Nature of the Divine Sovereignty," pp. 112–13.
[39] Marshall, "Predestination," p. 136.
[40] Pinnock, "Responsible Freedom," p. 102.
[41] Jack Cottrell, "The Nature of the Divine Sovereignty," pp. 104–5.
[42] Pinnock, *Grace Unlimited* p. 15.
[43] Pinnock, "Responsible Freedom," p. 95.

Why then, in the Arminian view, did the fall and sin come about? Pinnock answers that "they occur because God refuses to mechanize man or to force his will upon him."[44] And Marshall says, with respect to the "possibility of my predetermining a course of action involving myself and another subject," that "on the level of free agents it is impossible."[45] He objects that the analogy of God and world as being like an author and a play is unhelpful because if we ask whether the characters are indeed free, "this is an unreal question."[46]

However, it should be noted that Arminian theologians are certainly willing to allow some kinds of influence by God on human beings. Marshall says, "Prayer also influences men … The wills of men can thus be affected by prayer or else we would not pray for them. *To believe in prayer is thus to believe in some kind of limitation of human freedom, and in some kind of incomprehensible influence upon the wills of men.*"[47]

To drive home their point about the essential freedom of the human will, advocates of an Arminian position draw attention to the frequency of the free offer of the gospel in the New Testament. They would say that these invitations to people to repent and come to Christ for salvation, if *bona fide* must imply the *ability* to respond to them. Thus, all people without exception have the ability to respond, not just those who have been sovereignly given that ability by God in a special way.

In further support of this point, Arminians would see 1 Corinthians 10:13 as clearly affirming our ability not to sin. Paul says to the Corinthians, "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, *that you may be able to endure it.*" But, it is said, this statement would be false if God sometimes ordains that we sin, for then we would not be "able" to escape from temptation without sinning.

4. The Arminian View Encourages Responsible Christian Living, While the Calvinistic View Encourages a Dangerous Fatalism. Christians who hold an Arminian position argue that the Calvinist view, when thoroughly understood, destroys motives for responsible Christian behavior. Randall Basinger says that the Calvinist view "establishes that what is ought to be and rules out the consideration that things could and/or should have been different."[48] Basinger continues by saying that Christians

> who evoke and act on the basis of God's sovereignty are guilty of an arbitrary, unlivable, and dangerous fatalism … In contrast to this, the Arminian believes that what actually occurs in the world is, to an extent, consequent on the human will; God's exhaustive control over the world is denied. This means that things can occur that God does not will or want; things not only *can* be different but often *should* be different. And from all this follows our responsibility to work with God to bring about a better world.[49]

However, Basinger goes on to make a further point: Calvinists, in practice, often avoid such fatalism and "live and talk like Arminians."[50] Thus, on the one hand, Basinger's challenge is a

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[44] Ibid., p. 108.
[45] Marshall, "Predestination," p. 132. Similarly, he says, "When we try to think of a person foreordaining the course of a relationship between himself and another person … *this concept is logically self-contradictory*" (p. 135).
[46] Ibid., p. 133.
[47] Ibid., pp. 139–40 (emphasis in original text).
[48] Randall G. Basinger, "Exhaustive Divine Sovereignty: A Practical Critique," in *The Grace of God, the Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism* ed. Clark H. Pinnock, p. 94.
[49] Ibid., p. 196.
[50] Ibid., p. 204.

warning against the practical extremes to which he claims Calvinism should logically drive Christians. On the other hand, his objection claims that when Calvinists live the way they know they must live, in responsible obedience to God, they are either inconsistent with their view of divine sovereignty or else not allowing their view of God's sovereign control to affect their daily lives.

H. Response to the Arminian Position

Many within the evangelical world will find these four Arminian arguments convincing. They will feel that these arguments represent what they intuitively know about themselves, their own actions, and the way the world functions, and that these arguments best account for the repeated emphasis in Scripture on our responsibility and the real consequences of our choices. However, there are some answers that can be given to the Arminian position.

1. Are These Scripture Passages Unusual Examples, or Do They Describe the Way God Works Ordinarily? In response to the objection that the examples of God's providential control only refer to limited or specific events, it may be said first that the examples are so numerous (see above, pp. 317–27) that they seem to be designed to describe to us the ways in which God works all the time. God does not just cause *some* grass to grow; he causes all grass to grow. He does not just send *some* rain; he sends all the rain. He does not just keep *some* sparrows from falling to the ground without his will; he keeps all sparrows from falling to the ground without his will. He does not just know every word on David's tongue before he speaks it; he knows the words on all our tongues before we speak them. He has not just chosen Paul and the Christians in the Ephesian churches to be holy and blameless before him; he has chosen all Christians to be holy and blameless before him. This is why Cottrell's claim, that God was working differently in Australia and South America than in the Old Testament,[51] is so unconvincing: Scripture is given to tell us the ways of God, and when we have dozens of examples throughout Old and New Testaments where there is such clear teaching on this, it is appropriate for us to conclude that this is the way in which God *always* works with human beings. By contrast, there seems to be nothing in Scripture that would indicate that some things are outside God's providential control, or that these ways of God's acting are unusual or unrepresentative of the ways in which he acts generally.

Moreover, many of the verses that speak of God's providence are very general: Christ "continually carries along *all things* by his word of power" (Heb. 1:3, author's translation), and "in him all things hold together" (Col. 1:17). "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). He "accomplishes *all things* according to the counsel of his will" (Eph. 1:11).[52] He

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[51] 51 Jack Cottrell, "The Nature of the Divine Sovereignty," p. 113.

[52] 52 Jack Cottrell, "The Nature of the Divine Sovereignty," argues that the context of Eph. 1:11 shows that it does not include all things in the universe but is restricted to a specific focus: "This focus is "the mystery of his will' (1:9), which is the uniting of Jews and Gentiles together into one body, the church (3:6)." Thus, he says, the verse only "refers to "all things' required for uniting Jews and Gentiles under one Head in one body" (p. 116).

But this argument is not convincing. Cottrell must skip over to Eph. 3:6 to get the contextual restriction he seeks for the "all things" in 1:11. In doing this he ignores the clearly cosmic scope of the context as defined in the immediately preceding verse, a verse that is in the same sentence in the Greek text: "as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite *all things* [τ   πάντα] in him, *things in heaven and things on earth*" (Eph. 1:10). All things in heaven and on earth includes the whole universe. Eph. 1:21–22 further explains that God has exalted Christ "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion … and he has put *all things* under his feet and has made him the head over *all things* for the church." Once again the scope is universal. The "mystery" of God's will mentioned in Eph. 1:9 is not limited to the uniting of Jews and Gentiles (as in 3:6) but is defined by 1:10 as a plan to unite all things in Christ. The term *mystery* (Gk. μυστήριον, G3696) in Paul means something previously hidden but now made known by

provides our food (Matt. 6:11), supplies all our needs (Phil. 4:19), directs our steps (Prov. 20:24) and works in us to will and to do his good pleasure (Phil. 2:13). Such Scripture passages have in view more than exceptional examples of an unusual intervention by God in the affairs of human beings; they describe the way God always works in the world.

2. Does the Calvinistic Doctrine of God's Providence Make God Responsible for Sin?
Against the Calvinistic view of God's providence (which allows that he decrees to permit sin and evil) Arminians would say that God is not responsible for sin and evil *because he did not ordain them or cause them in any way*. This is indeed *one way* of absolving God from responsibility and blame for sin, but is it the biblical way?

The problem is whether the Arminian position can really account for many texts that clearly say that God ordains that some people sin or do evil (see Section B.7, above, pp. 322–27). The death of Christ is the prime example of this, but there are many others in Scripture (Joseph's brothers, Pharaoh, the Egyptians, the Canaanites, Eli's sons, David's census, and the Babylonians, to mention a few). The response could be made that these were unusual events, exceptions to God's ordinary way of acting. But it does not solve the problem, for, on the Arminian view, how can God be holy if he ordains even one sinful act?

The Calvinist position seems preferable: God himself never sins but always brings about his will *through secondary causes*; that is, through personal moral agents who voluntarily, willingly do what God has ordained. These personal moral agents (both human beings and evil angels) are to blame for the evil they do. While the Arminian position objects that, on a human level, people are also responsible for *what they cause others to do* we can answer that Scripture is not willing to apply such reasoning to God. Rather, Scripture repeatedly gives examples where God in a mysterious, hidden way somehow ordains that people do wrong, but continually places the blame for that wrong on the individual human who does wrong and never on God himself. The Arminian position seems to have failed to show why God *cannot* work in this way in the world, preserving both his holiness and our individual human responsibility for sin.

3. Can Choices Ordained by God Be Real Choices? In response to the claim that choices ordained by God cannot be real choices, it must be said that this is simply an assumption based once again on human experience and intuition, not on specific texts of Scripture.[53] Yet Scripture does not indicate that we can extrapolate from our human experience when dealing with God's providential control of his creatures, especially human beings. Arminians have simply not answered the question, Where does Scripture say that a choice ordained by God is not a real choice?[54] When we read passages indicating that God works through our will, our power to choose, and our personal volition, on what basis can we say that a choice brought about by God

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revelation, and it can refer to different things in different contexts: in Eph. 5:32 it refers to marriage as a symbol of the union between Christ and the church; in 1 Cor. 15:51 it refers to the resurrection body; etc.

[53] This is the case with Cottrell's analogy of the man who uses a lever to move a rock. He says the lever "is not a true second cause, but only an instrument of the real cause" ("The Nature of the Divine Sovereignty," p. 104). But here Cottrell makes a common mistake, assuming that analogies from human experience, rather than the testimony of Scripture itself, can determine what is a real cause and what is not. The analogy of a man using a lever to move a rock does not fit, because God is far greater than any man, and we as real persons are far greater than any lever.

[54] The lack of scriptural support for this fundamental Arminian idea is evident in Jack Cottrell's discussion of free will. After accurately explaining that Calvinists say we are free only in the sense of making voluntary, willing choices, Cottrell says, "*In my judgment* however, the mere ability to act in accord with one's desires is not a sufficient criterion of freedom" ("The Nature of the Divine Sovereignty," p. 103, emphasis mine). He then gives no evidence from Scripture to show why this is his judgment (pp. 103–4). I would respond that Cottrell has simply imported into the discussion a nonbiblical *assumption* about the nature of human freedom and then has pronounced Calvinism incapable of meeting his (nonbiblical) criterion.

through these means is not a real choice? It seems better to affirm that God *says* that our choices are real and to conclude that therefore they *are real*. Scripture repeatedly affirms that our choices are genuine choices, that they have *real* results, and that those results last for eternity. "Do this, and you will live" (Luke 10:28). "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that *whoever believes in him* should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

This causes us to conclude that God has made us in such a way that (1) he ordains all that we do, and (2) we exercise our personal will and make real, voluntary choices. Because we cannot understand this should we therefore reject it? We cannot understand (in any final sense) how a plant can live, or how a bumblebee can fly, or how God can be omnipresent or eternal. Should we therefore reject those facts? Should we not rather simply accept them as true either because we see that plants in fact do live and bumblebees in fact do fly, or because Scripture itself teaches that God is omnipresent and eternal?

Calvin several times distinguishes between "necessity" and "compulsion" with regard to our will: unbelievers necessarily sin, but no compulsion forces them to sin against their will.[55] In response to the objection that an act cannot be willing or voluntary if it is a necessary act, Calvin points to both the good deeds of God (who *necessarily* does good) and the evil deeds of the Devil (who *necessarily* does evil):

> If the fact that he must do good does not hinder God's free will in doing good; if the Devil, who can only do evil, yet sins with his will—who shall say that man therefore sins less willingly because he is subject to the necessity of sinning?[56]

Who are we to say that choices somehow caused by God *cannot* be real? On what basis can we prove that? God in Scripture tells us that he ordains all that comes to pass. He also tells us that our choices and actions are significant *in his sight* and that we are responsible *before him* for our actions. We need simply to believe these things and to take comfort in them. After all, *he alone* determines what is significant, what is real, and what is genuine personal responsibility in the universe.

But do our actions have any effect on God? At this point Arminians will object that while Calvinists may *say* that a choice caused by God is a real choice, it is not real in any ultimate sense, because, on a Calvinist view, nothing that God does can ever be a response to what we do. Jack Cottrell says:

> Calvinism is still a theology of determinism as long as it declares that nothing God does can be conditioned by man or can be a reaction to something in the world. The idea that a sovereign God must always *act* and never *react* is a point on which almost all Calvinists seem to agree … Reformed theologians agree that the eternal decree is unconditional or absolute … "Decretal theology" decrees that "God cannot be affected by, nor respond to, anything external to him," says Daane.[57]

But here Cottrell has misunderstood Reformed theology for two reasons. First, he has quoted James Daane, who, though he belongs to the Christian Reformed Church, has written as an opponent, not a defender, of classical Reformed theology, and his statement does not represent a position Reformed theologians would endorse. Second, Cottrell has confused God's decrees before creation with God's actions in time. It is true that Calvinists would say that God's eternal

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[55] See *Institutes* 1:294–96 (2.3.5).
[56] Ibid., p. 295 (2.3.5).
[57] Jack Cottrell, "The Nature of the Divine Sovereignty," pp. 102–3. The quotation at the end is from James Daane, *The Freedom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), p. 160.

decrees were not influenced by any of our actions and cannot be changed by us, since they were made *before creation*.[58] But to conclude from that that Calvinists think God does not react *in time* to anything we do, or is not influenced by anything we do, is simply false. No Calvinist theologian known to me has ever said that God is not influenced by what we do or does not react to what we do. He is grieved at our sin. He delights in our praise. He answers our prayers. To say that God does not react to our actions is to deny the whole history of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation.

Now a Calvinist would add that God has eternally decreed that he would respond to us as he does. In fact, he has decreed that we would act as we do and he would respond to our actions. But his responses are still genuine responses, his answers to prayers are still genuine answers to prayer, his delight in our praise is still genuine delight. Cottrell may of course object that a response that God has planned long ago is not a real response, but this is far different from saying that Calvinists believe God does not respond to what we do. Moreover, we return to the same unsupported assumption underlying this objection: on what scriptural basis can Cottrell say that a response God has planned long ago is not a real response?[59]

Here it is helpful for us to realize that there is no other reality in the universe except what God himself has made. Is a thunderstorm caused by God a *real* thunderstorm? Is a king that God establishes on a throne a *real* king? Is a word that God causes me to speak (Ps. 139:4; Prov. 16:1) a *real* word? Of course they are real! There *is* no other reality than that which God brings about! Then is a human choice that God somehow causes to happen a *real* choice? Yes, it is, in the same way that a thunderstorm or a king is real according to their own characteristics and properties. The choice that I make is not a "forced" or "involuntary" choice—we make choices all the time, and we have absolutely no sense of being forced or compelled to choose one thing rather than another.

Now some may object that this view makes us mere "puppets" or "robots." But we are not puppets or robots; we are *real persons*. Puppets and robots do not have the power of personal choice or even individual thought. We, by contrast, think, decide, and choose. Again the Arminian wrongly takes information from our situation as human beings and then uses that information to place limitations on what God *can* or *cannot* do. All of these analogies from human experience fail to recognize that God is far greater than our limited human abilities. Moreover, we are far more real and complex than any robot or puppet would ever be—we are real persons created by an infinitely powerful and infinitely wise God.

Much of our difficulty in understanding how God can cause us to choose something willingly comes from the finite nature of our creaturely existence. In a hypothetical world where all living things created by God were plants rooted in the ground, we might imagine one plant arguing to another that God *could not* make living creatures who could move about on the earth, for how could they carry their roots with them? And if their roots were not in the ground, how could they receive nourishment? An "Arminian" plant might even argue, "In order for God to create a world with living things, he *had to* create them with roots and with the characteristic of living all their

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[58] See above, pp. 332–33, on God's decrees.

[59] I am not sure if Cottrell would be able to object that a response planned by God long ago is not a real response, because he himself talks about God foreknowing our actions and then planning how he will respond to them. He says, "Even before the creation God foreknew every free-will act … Nothing takes God by surprise … God knew, even before creation, when and how he would have to intervene in his world to accomplish his purposes … God's foreknowledge also enables him to plan his own responses to and uses of human choices even before they are made" ("The Nature of the Divine Sovereignty," p. 112). But if Cottrell is willing to say that God planned long ago how he would respond to human choices, it is hard to see how he can object to the Calvinist position that God decreed long ago how he would respond when we pray or act.

lives in a single place. To say that God *could not* create living things that move about on the earth does not challenge God's omnipotence, for that is simply to say that he cannot do things that logically cannot be done. Therefore it is impossible that God could create a world where living things also have the capacity of moving about on the earth." The problem with this plant is that it has limited God's power by virtue of its own "plant-like" experience.

On a higher level, we could imagine a creation that had both plants and animals but no human beings. In that creation, we can imagine an argument between a "Calvinist" dog and a "Arminian" dog, where the "Calvinist" dog would argue that it *is* possible for God to create creatures that not only can communicate by barking to one another but also can record their barks in marks on paper and can send them silently to be understood by other creatures many days' journey distant, creatures who have never been seen by the sending creature who first marked his barks down on paper. The "Arminian" dog would reply that God *cannot* do such a thing, because *essential* to the idea of creaturely communication is *hearing* and *seeing* (and usually *smelling!*) the creature from whom one receives the communication. To say that there can be communication without ever hearing or seeing or smelling the other creature is an absurd idea! It is beyond the range of possible occurrences and is logically inconceivable. Therefore it is impossible to think that God could create a creature with such communicating abilities.

In both cases the "Arminian" plant and the "Arminian" dog are in the wrong, because they have incorrectly limited the kind of thing God could create by deriving what was possible for God (in their opinion) from their own finite creaturely existence. But this is very similar to the Arminian theologian who simply asserts (on the basis of his own perception of human experience) that God *cannot* create a creature who makes willing, voluntary, meaningful choices, and that those choices are nonetheless ordained by God. Similarly, the Arminian theologian who argues that God *cannot* ordain that evil come about and not yet himself be responsible for evil, is limiting God based merely on observation of finite human experience.

4. Does a Calvinistic View of Providence Encourage Either a Dangerous Fatalism or a Tendency to "Live Like Arminians"? The view of providence presented above emphasizes the need for responsible obedience, so it is not correct to say that it encourages the kind of fatalism that says that whatever is, should be. Those who accuse Reformed writers of believing this have simply not understood the Reformed doctrine of providence.

But do Calvinists "live like Arminians" anyway? Both Calvinists and Arminians believe that our actions have real results and that they are eternally significant. Both agree that we are responsible for our actions and that we make voluntary, willing choices. Both groups will agree that God answers prayer, that proclaiming the gospel results in people being saved, and that obedience to God results in blessing in life, while disobedience results in lack of God's blessing.

But the differences are very significant. Calvinists when true to their doctrine will live with a far more comprehensive trust in God in all circumstances and a far greater freedom from worry about the future, because they are convinced, not just that God will somehow cause his major purposes to work out right in the end, but that *all things* work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose (Rom. 8:28). They will also be thankful to God for *all* the benefits that come to us from whatever quarter, for the one who believes in providence is assured that the ultimate reason for all things that happen is not some chance occurrence in the universe, nor is it the "free will" of another human being, but it is ultimately the goodness of God himself. They will also have great patience in adversity, knowing that it has not come about

because God was unable to prevent it, but because it, too, is part of his wise plan. So the differences are immense. Calvin says:

> Gratitude of mind for the favorable outcome of things, patience in adversity, and also incredible freedom from worry about the future all necessarily follow upon this knowledge … Ignorance of providence is the ultimate of all miseries; the highest blessedness lies in the knowledge of it.[60]

5. Additional Objections to the Arminian Position. In addition to responding to the four specific Arminian claims mentioned above some remaining objections to it need to be considered.

a. On an Arminian View, How Can God Know the Future?: According to the Arminian view, our human choices are not caused by God. They are totally free. But Scripture gives many examples of God predicting the future and of prophecies being fulfilled exactly. How can God predict the future in this way if it is not certain what will happen?

In response to this question, Arminians give three different kinds of answer. Some say that God is not able to know details about the future; specifically, they deny that God is able to know what choices individual human beings will make in the future.[61] This seems to me to be the most consistent Arminian position, but the result is that, while God may be able to make some fairly accurate predictions based on complete knowledge of the present, these cannot be certain predictions. Ultimately it also means that God is ignorant of *all future human choices* which means that he does not even know what the stock market will do tomorrow, or who will be elected as the next president of the United States, or who will be converted. On this view, what event of human history *could* God know with certainty in advance? No event. This is a radical revision of the idea of omniscience and seems to be clearly denied by the dozens of examples of unfailing predictive prophecy in Scripture, the fulfillment of which demonstrates that God is the true God in opposition to false gods.[62]

Other Arminians simply affirm that God *knows* everything that will happen, but this does not mean that he has *planned* or *caused* what will happen—it simply means that he has the ability to see into the future. (The phrase sometimes used to express this view is "Foreknowledge does not imply foreordination.") This is probably the most common Arminian view, and it is ably expressed by Jack Cottrell: "I affirm that God has a true foreknowledge of future free-will choices without himself being the agent that causes them or renders them certain."[63]

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[60] [60] Calvin, *Institutes* 1:219–25 (1.17.7, 11).

[61] [61] Richard Rice, "Divine Foreknowledge and Free-Will Theism," in *The Grace of God, the Will of Man* pp. 121–39, takes this position (see esp. pp. 129, 134–37). Rice says, "God knows a great deal about what will happen … All that God does not know is the content of future free decisions, and this is because decisions are not there to know until they occur" (p. 134). In order to take this position and maintain God's omniscience, Rice redefines omniscience: "An omniscient being knows everything logically knowable" (p. 128), and then he defines "logically knowable" to exclude future human choices. On this basis, Rice argues that God does not know the results of future free decisions of human beings, since these are not logically knowable.

Clark Pinnock also explains how he came to this position: "I knew the Calvinist argument that exhaustive foreknowledge was tantamount to predestination because it implies the fixity of all things from "eternity past,' and I could not shake off its logical force" ("From Augustine to Arminius: A Pilgrimage in Theology," in *The Grace of God, the Will of Man* p. 25). He rejected exhaustive foreknowledge and decided that "*God knows everything that can be known* but that free choices would not be something that can be known even by God because they are not yet settled in reality. Decisions not yet made do not exist anywhere to be known even by God … God too moves into a future not wholly known because not yet fixed" (ibid., pp. 25–26, emphasis mine).

[62] [62] See chapter 11, pp. 171–72, also p. 190, on God's knowledge of the future.

[63] [63] Jack Cottrell, "The Nature of the Divine Sovereignty," p. 111.

The problem with this position is that, even if God did not plan or cause things to happen, the fact that they are foreknown means that they will *certainly come about*. And this means that our decisions are predetermined *by something* (whether fate or the inevitable cause-and-effect mechanism of the universe), and they still are not free in the sense the Arminian wishes them to be free. If our future choices are known, then they are fixed. And if they are fixed, then they are not "free" in the Arminian sense (undetermined or uncaused).

A third Arminian response is called "middle knowledge." Those who take this view would say that the future choices of people are not determined by God, but that God knows them anyway, because he knows *all future possibilities* and he knows how each free creature will respond in any set of circumstances that might occur.[64] William Craig says:

> God's insight into the will of a free creature is of such a surpassing quality that God knows exactly what the free creature would do were God to place him in a certain set of circumstances … By knowing what every possible free creature would do in any possible situation, God can by bringing about that situation know what the creature will freely do … Thus he foreknows with certainty everything that happens in the world.[65]

But Craig's view does not sustain a view of freedom in the sense Arminians usually maintain: that no cause or set of causes made a person choose the way he or she did. On Craig's view, the surrounding circumstances and the person's own disposition *guarantee* that a certain choice will be made—otherwise, God could not know what the choice would be from his exhaustive knowledge of the person and the circumstances. But if God knows what the choice will be, and if that choice is guaranteed, then it could not be otherwise. Moreover, if both the person and the circumstances have been created by God, then ultimately the outcome has been determined by God. This sounds very close to freedom in a Calvinist sense, but it is certainly not the kind of freedom that most Arminians would accept.

b. On an Arminian View, How Can Evil Exist If God Did Not Want It?: Arminians quite clearly say that the entrance of evil into the world was not according to the will of God. Pinnock says, "The fall of man is an eloquent refutation to the theory that God's will is always done."[66] But how can evil exist if God did not want it to exist? If evil happens in spite of the fact that God does not want it to happen, this seems to deny God's omnipotence: he wanted to prevent evil, but he was unable to do so. How then can we believe that this God is omnipotent?

The common Arminian response is to say that God was *able* to prevent evil but he chose to *allow for the possibility* of evil in order to guarantee that angels and humans would have the freedom necessary for meaningful choices. In other words, God *had to* allow for the possibility of sinful choices in order to allow genuine human choices. Cottrell says, "This God-given freedom includes human freedom to rebel and to sin against the Creator himself. By creating a world in which sin was possible, God thereby bound himself to *react* in certain specific ways should sin become a reality."[67]

But this is not a satisfactory response either, for it implies that God will have to allow for the possibility of sinful choices in heaven eternally. On the Arminian position, if any of our choices

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[64] [64] See William L. Craig, "Middle Knowledge, a Calvinist-Arminian Rapprochement?" in *The Grace of God, the Will of Man* pp. 141–64. See also his book *The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).
[65] [65] Craig, "Middle Knowledge," pp. 150–51.
[66] [66] Pinnock, "Responsible Freedom," p. 102.
[67] [67] Cottrell, "The Nature of Divine Sovereignty," p. 109.

and actions in heaven are to be genuine and real, then they will *have to* include the possibility of sinful choices. But this implies that even in heaven, for all eternity, we will face the real possibility of choosing evil—and therefore the possibility of rebelling against God and losing our salvation and being cast out of heaven! This is a terrifying thought, but it seems a necessary implication of the Arminian view.

Yet there is an implication that is more troubling: If *real* choices have to allow for the possibility of choosing evil, then (1) God's choices are not real, since he cannot choose evil, or (2) God's choices are real, and there is the genuine possibility that God might someday choose to do evil—perhaps a little, and perhaps a great deal. If we ponder the second implication it becomes terrifying. But it is contrary to the abundant testimony of Scripture.[68] On the other hand, the first implication is clearly false: God is the definition of what is real, and it is clearly an error to say that his choices are not real. Both implications therefore provide good reason for rejecting the Arminian position that real choices must allow the possibility of choosing evil. But this puts us back to the earlier question for which there does not seem to be a satisfactory answer from the Arminian position: How can evil exist if God did not want it to exist?

c. On an Arminian View, How Can We Know That God Will Triumph Over Evil?: If we go back to the Arminian assertion that evil is *not* according to the will of God, another problem arises: if all the evil now in the world came into the world even though God did not want it, how can we be sure that God will triumph over it in the end? Of course, God *says* in Scripture that he will triumph over evil. But if he was unable to keep it out of his universe in the first place and it came in against his will, and if he is unable to predict the outcome of any future events that involve free choices by human, angelic, and demonic agents, how then can we be sure that God's declaration that he will triumph over all evil is in itself true? Perhaps this is just a hopeful prediction of something that (on the Arminian viewpoint) God simply cannot know. Far from the "incredible freedom from worry about the future" which the Calvinist has because he knows that an omnipotent God makes "all things work together for good" (Rom. 8:28 KJV), the Arminian position seems logically to drive us to a deep-seated anxiety about the ultimate outcome of history.

Both of these last two objections regarding evil make us realize that, while we may have difficulties in thinking about the Reformed view of evil as ordained by God and completely under the control of God, there are far more serious difficulties with the Arminian view of evil as not ordained or even willed by God, and therefore not assuredly under the control of God.

d. The Difference in the Unanswered Questions: Since we are finite in our understanding, we inevitably will have some unanswered questions about every biblical doctrine. Yet on this issue the questions that Calvinists and Arminians must leave unanswered are quite different. On the one hand, Calvinists must say that they do not know the answer to the following questions:

1. Exactly how God can ordain that we do evil willingly, and yet God not be blamed for evil.
2. Exactly how God can cause us to choose something willingly.

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[68] [68] See chapter 13, pp. 197–98, 201–2, 203–5, for scriptural testimony to God's goodness, holiness, and righteousness, and chapter 11, pp. 163–68, on God's unchangeableness.
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To both, Calvinists would say that the answer is somehow to be found in an awareness of God's infinite greatness, in the knowledge of the fact that he can do far more than we could ever think possible. So the effect of these unanswered questions is to increase our appreciation of the greatness of God.

On the other hand, Arminians must leave unanswered questions regarding God's knowledge of the future, why he would allow evil when it is against his will, and whether he will certainly triumph over evil. Their failure to resolve these questions tends to diminish the greatness of God—his omniscience, his omnipotence, and the absolute reliability of his promises for the future. And these unanswered questions tend to exalt the greatness of man (his freedom to do what God does not want) and the power of evil (it comes and remains in the universe even though God does not want it). Moreover, by denying that God can make creatures who have real choices that are nevertheless caused by him, the Arminian position diminishes the wisdom and skill of God the Creator.