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**Human Freedom: Libertarian or Compatible?
A Pastoral Plea for Paradox**

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Introduction: Problems and Paradoxes

One need not be a theologian or philosopher to appreciate the abiding tension between human freedom and divine sovereignty. The obvious intellectual, theological, and emotional stress between these

¹ See <http://birminghamseminary.org>.

two notions has relentlessly dogged our steps and ignited vociferous debates, seemingly forever. Not even the most cursory reflection on the Biblical storyline can escape the problems that inevitably confront us as we navigate through the drama of Scripture—a drama that demonstrates both truths of moral agency and comprehensive divine sovereignty. For example, those who are more familiar with the New Testament and the life and ministry of Jesus will remember the strange and disturbing words spoken by the apostle Peter as he preached his Pentecostal sermon. In Acts 2:23 Peter claimed that the arch crime of the universe, the crucifixion of the innocent Son of God, was the result of the “predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God” (NASB).² Yet Peter also charged his audience with murder. “You nailed Him to a cross ... and put Him to death,” he proclaimed. As if this were not enough, Peter later announced that those human agents who were directly responsible and morally accountable for the death of the Son of God, “Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel,” actually accomplished “whatever Thy hand and Thy purpose predestined to occur” (Acts 4:27-28).

With these words looming before us we confront the discomfiting juxtaposition of human agency and God’s sovereignty. Like the many other places throughout the sacred record, there is no attempt by the biblical author to harmonize or intellectually justify such apparently (and hopelessly, at least from our limited perspective) disparate claims. These declarations stand as they are, and we are left to ponder how they could both be true at the same time and in the same relationship. How could people who are free, in the sense that they can be held accountable for what they do or do not do, function as actors in a divine drama, moving, speaking, thinking, and even committing murder in concert with a predetermined script?³

In the light of this persistent theological and philosophical conundrum I would like to humbly offer a pathway through the

² Scripture passages will be quoted from the New American Standard translation. The Lockman Foundation: La Habra, 1977.

³ I am very appreciative of the insights of John Frame who has offered a very helpful model for understanding divine sovereignty and human freedom in *The Doctrine of God: A Theology of Lordship* (Philipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002), 156-159. Frame urges us to consider the unfolding drama of redemption, in all of its varied details, in terms of a novel authored by God. The characters in the novel act in perfect accord with the wishes and designs of the author, yet they alone are responsible for their actions.

troublesome terrain. Better yet, I would like to set forth a way to think about such paradoxes or antimonies in a manner that will preserve both poles of the paradox while simultaneously releasing a little bit of the bothersome tension that always seems to derail our conversations and even divide us.⁴

However, before I offer my theological two cents on this admittedly complex and frequently investigated subject, a word about my qualifications, or lack thereof, is in order. To borrow a line from the prophet, I am neither a philosopher nor the son of a philosopher. Whether or not I am any kind of a theologian at all will have to be determined by someone else. First and foremost I am a pastor and preacher, and my interest in this subject is thoroughly guided and controlled by my responsibility to set forth the whole counsel of God before my people and to do so within a context of real life—a life that is filled with joys and sorrows and events that sometimes on the surface appear to be random and meaningless, and shall I dare say, even gratuitous. So I rather suspect that the reader will need to keep this pastoral context in mind as we proceed further into these deep waters. My arguments may indeed be philosophically simplistic and unsatisfying, and I am quite sure that many of my more philosophically trained readers will find much to criticize along the way. However, I would appeal for a fair hearing, not upon the basis of any skill I might possess but upon the foundation of one controlling Biblical presupposition that will guide my reflections. While I will be setting forth and explaining and applying this Biblical/theological foundation in more detail below, it is appropriate to state it here at the outset, to place all my cards on the table, so to speak.

Like all pastors, I live and minister the Word of God in the midst of the tragic debris and painful consequences of human sin. Yet those same Scriptures that graphically reveal the utter depravity of our hearts and the sinfulness of our choices and the devastating consequences that inevitably flow from our self-inflicted corruption also tell us that God reigns over all of life in a comprehensive, exhaustive way. Scripture leaves us with the hope that in the end God's purposes will be accomplished and that human history (on both the macrocosmic and microcosmic scale) is pulsating toward a grand

⁴ In the balance of this paper I shall defend a nuanced version of theological compatibalism.

climax that will both glorify the Creator and bring final salvation for those who are redeemed by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Were it not for this fact, I would have nothing to offer my parishioners in times of failure, suffering, and tragedy.

The *Westminster Confession of Faith*, one of the components of our Church's constitution, affirms that God has sovereignly ordained all that comes to pass, inclusive of the fall and human sin, but in such a way that He cannot be charged with being the author of that sin. We affirm, even in the midst of our pain and suffering and questions, that God is sovereign over all things and all people, and yet we remain free in such a way that God can righteously hold us responsible for our sins and transgressions. Furthermore, we affirm that the actions, or inactions, of the sinner are truly his, un-coerced and free in the sense that the sinner is doing exactly as he pleases. The point at which these *prima facie* incongruent claims intersect is what I shall refer to as a paradox or antimony.⁵ I would further submit that the way we must think of such tenaciously opposed truth-claims finds its foundation in another key biblical affirmation, a controlling presupposition or starting point if you will.

Deuteronomy 29:29 has been frequently marshaled in support of those who affirm a robust view of meticulous divine sovereignty, and so I join that chorus in appealing to these inspired words to buttress my proposal. It seems to me that in these words we have something of a dichotomy. On one hand there are those things that God has seen fit to make known to us creatures: "the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever." But there is that other epistemological category that we must deal with: the "secret things" that "belong to the Lord our God." One kind of knowledge and information is "revealed" and open for creaturely inspection. The other is "secret" and hidden from our eyes, unavailable for philosophical dissection. The perplexing question this passage seems to leave us with has to do with the contents of the "secret things." What are these "things" and what do they consist of exactly? Could it be that within these "secret things" are hidden the solutions to such theological mysteries, antimonies, and paradoxes as the doctrine of the Trinity, the nature

⁵ I am employing these terms as synonyms. In my usage, a paradox, or antimony, is apparently counterintuitive to the human observer. However, it is not illogical in the sense that all such paradoxes find their resolution in the mind of God. I will explore this below in greater detail.

and function of the divine attributes, and the interplay between human moral agency and divine sovereignty, among the many others?⁶ Could it be that our affirmation of the incomprehensibility of God has something to do with these hidden “things” that are off limits to us. In other words, it would seem that the claim that God is incomprehensible and infinite in being and perfections is meaningless and void of any contents unless there are truths about Him (His nature and power) and His relationship to the world (His actions in space and time) that are beyond the limits of our noetic powers.⁷ Thus, if there were no paradoxes or antinomies and mysteries of the faith, then God would not be incomprehensible as the Church, following the lead of Scripture, has consistently claimed that He is.⁸ We would then know (or possibly advance to the stage where we know) all that God knows, and our knowledge would potentially be as exhaustive as His and there would be no category called “secret things” and this discussion of free will and divine sovereignty would be “sound and fury, signifying nothing.” So as simplistic as it may sound, I would argue that there must be some meaningful contents to this notion of God’s incomprehensibility. There must be something, truths or facts about God and His workings in the world of men and matter, which exists in this Scriptural category called “secret things.”⁹

⁶ Here I gladly stand upon the broad shoulders of my theological mentor, Dr. Roger Nicole, whose Th.D. dissertation has significantly influenced my thinking on biblical antinomies. See Roger R. Nicole, “An Introduction to the Study of Certain Antinomies of the Christian Faith.” Th.D. dissertation. Gordon Divinity School, 1943.

⁷ This would be true given at least two key doctrinal affirmations. First, is the notion of human finitude. We are not God and are in no way divine. It follows that our minds, our intellectual abilities and capacities, are limited to those of creatures made in the divine image and likeness. Secondly, our finite minds are also sinful. Reformed theologians speak of this as noetic depravity and by that they mean that mankind’s fall into sin has also affected the way we think and reason. According to Paul in Romans 1:18, we are always resisting and suppressing the truth that God has seen fit to reveal about Himself in general revelation, and on the basis of texts such as 2 Corinthians 4:3-4, this seems also to apply in some way to special revelation as well.

⁸ I treat this in greater detail in “*Paradox Lost: Open Theism and the Deconstruction of Divine Incomprehensibility--A Critical Analysis.*” PhD dissertation. Trinity Theological Seminary, 2005.

⁹ I am well aware of the exegetical debate surrounding the interpretation of “secret things.” In support of my contention that these “things” relate to what man is capable of grasping intellectually I would appeal, for example, to Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 360-361; *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem Van Gemeren, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 301; J. A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 5, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1974), 284.

I. A Tempting Response

Before I offer my humble proposal, let me say a word or two about the intellectual temptations we inevitably face when we approach such theological intersections as human freedom and divine sovereignty. Invariably we are tempted to seek a rational explanation for every theological truth we are confronted with in Scripture. This fact seems to be only ‘natural.’ Part of our human constitution is that irrepressible desire to know all things exhaustively and to explore the depths of all phenomena we encounter. This is, indeed, a noble thing in most cases, and one might even claim that such probing brings glory to the God who created us in His image and likeness. Without such a spirit of exploration there would have been no mechanism driving us to excel in the many areas that have advanced human knowledge and capabilities in all disciplines. This search for answers has served us well and for this we can only offer our humble thanks to the Creator.

However, there is a sense in which this drive to know all things has hindered our worship of God and precipitated sin and theological error primarily in terms of intellectual pride. On one hand, we seem to believe that we are capable of getting to the bottom of all theological truths. We sometimes appear to embrace the assumption that we are capable of cracking all mysteries and solving all dilemmas. We are quite uncomfortable not knowing all we want to know when we want to know it, and if memory serves me correctly, this was in one sense the ‘original sin.’ Os Guinness has wisely cautioned us on this point by noting that, despite our protestations to the contrary, not every theological truth can be rationally substantiated and that we must “know where we can understand and where we can’t.”¹⁰ He continues:

People often misunderstand the rationality of faith. They imagine that they have believed in God because faith is rational—which it is. But they often expect every aspect of faith to be equally open to rational investigation—which it isn’t. So when they come across the first mystery they can’t understand, they conclude that the Christian faith is irrational after all.¹¹

¹⁰ Os Guinness. *God in the Dark: The Assurance of Faith Beyond a Shadow of Doubt* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1996), 79.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

What Guinness applies to the struggling believer in the pew can also serve as a powerful reminder to those who are more theologically trained. Everyone who takes up the sacred text must approach the divine revelation not only with appropriate humility but also knowing that “rationality is opposed to absurdity, not to mystery. The rationality of faith goes hand in hand with the mystery of faith.”¹² I believe Guinness has identified the most substantial problem we have when we approach magisterial doctrines that defy human explanation. We cannot seem to rest with mystery, and perhaps we believe that unless we can reconcile the disparate claims that we confront we are left with irrationality and absurdity. Yet, contrary to what might naturally be assumed, mystery and paradox are not opposed to rationality. While theological paradoxes are indeed “beyond human reason” they are “not against reason.”¹³

With all that said, it seems to me that Libertarian models of human freedom, including classical Arminianism and the more recently advanced Open model, derive their motivation from the twin assumptions that 1) such apparent paradoxes may be solved, and 2) that true paradoxes or antinomies are ultimately irrational. Classical Arminians ‘solve’ the problem of free will and divine sovereignty by their appeal to God’s prescience of future free human actions, while openness proponents argue for the logical impossibility of knowing such future actions at all. Both embrace a view of free will that may be classified as *contra-causal*, and by advancing such a definition of freedom both models in their own way reject the explicit biblical teaching of God’s sovereignty over all things. In my estimation, such a move unintentionally domesticates God, inappropriately ignores or erases Scriptural truth-claims, and pridefully exalts the creature above the Creator.

II. A Pastoral Plea

With these concerns set before us, I shall attempt to offer four specific suggestions as both a challenge to libertarian and openness theologians and as a way through the intellectual quagmire that seems to derail our discussions of human freedom. These suggestions have to do with 1) the basic assumptions that should initiate and govern our

¹² Ibid., 79-80.

¹³ Ibid., 80.

work as theologians and interpreters, 2) the necessity of affirming both poles of biblical antinomies, 3) the maintenance of the Creator–creature dialectic, specifically in terms of epistemology, and 4) the proper treatment of Scripture’s anthropomorphic descriptions of God. As stated earlier, my motive for these suggestions is thoroughly pastoral, for I am well aware that others have presented much more coherent philosophical defenses of a strong view of divine sovereignty against the libertarian positions.¹⁴ However, as I will seek to demonstrate, these suggestions serve the greater purpose of worship. Our theology should always advance the interests of our doxology, and if worshipping the correct God in the right way is not our abiding, preeminent concern, then I doubt that any argument for or against compatibalism will do much practical good for God’s people.

A. Beginning with Appropriate Presuppositions

It is a fact that all interpreters, including pastors, professional philosophers and theologians, as well as lay-people, begin the task of theological reflection armed with certain presuppositions that guide and delimit the nature and scope of their investigations. These presuppositions not only chart the course that the analysis will take but fundamentally affect the outcome of the inquiry itself. The realization and admission of this basic principle, that presuppositions exert profound influence upon one’s conclusions, is critical for both critics and proponents of free-will theology. Specifically, it is the reality of faulty presuppositions, I would argue, that has directed the course of libertarianism along a perilous route leading unwittingly toward the defamation, if not inevitable denial, of the biblical God. In order to circumvent such a consequence, libertarian theologians of the various stripes must be willing to reconsider the presuppositions that guide their practice of theology and biblical hermeneutics. Below, six presuppositions are offered as a framework for engaging in theology with an appropriate awareness and appreciation for God’s incomprehensibility and a corresponding commitment to the intellectual humility required to fully embrace the notion of the “secret things.” Each of these assumptions in its own way reinforces

¹⁴ For example, see John S. Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil: Theological Systems and the Problems of Evil* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004).

the *grand* presupposition set forth here that all theological reflection must begin and end with worship.

1. The Primacy of Scripture

If the Scriptures are the inspired and authoritative Word of God, then it follows that within the biblical revelation one discovers the ultimate source of information about God Himself and how He relates to the world that He has created and sustains.¹⁵ That is, what God has disclosed about Himself in the written Word takes precedence over any other potential source of knowledge about Him.¹⁶ To be more specific, the Scriptures hold the exalted position as the preeminent and infallible guide to all theological reflection. What God says about Himself in the written Word, therefore, is manifestly more important than what others say or postulate about Him.

The point to be made here is that the faithful interpreter must be committed to Scripture as a matter of first importance.¹⁷ This is not to suggest, however, that other disciplines or fields of knowledge (science, philosophy, literature, anthropology, etc.) do not play a role in the interpretative task but only that the interpreter's pre-commitment is to the primacy of Scripture. He must first and foremost reflect upon God as guided and governed by the Word. As a practical consequence, when there is disagreement between the affirmations of Scripture and the conclusions drawn by other disciplines, the interpreter's fundamental loyalty must be to God's self-disclosure in the Word. Thus, all data relative to the interpretive

¹⁵ For openness affirmations of biblical inspiration and inerrancy see Jason A. Nicholls, "Openness and Inerrancy: Can They be Compatible?" and Clark Pinnock, "Open Theism and Biblical Inerrancy," [online] Zondervan Academic, 2003, cited 1 February 2010, available from <<http://www.zondervanchurchsource.com>>. However, John Frame has challenged this claim. See *No Other God*, 205-207.

¹⁶ I am not discounting general revelation (God's creational Word) or God's self-revelation in Christ (God's incarnational Word). I am only appealing to Scripture as our sole (infallible and inerrant) source of written truth (God's inscripturated Word). For these categories see Gordon J. Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992): 77-88. Regarding epistemology, Spykman, 87, claims "it all comes down to Scripture. . . . [the Bible] is the hermeneutic key for our knowledge of the enduring norms of God's creational Word in its holding power for our life together in the world. Given our present human predicament, only in the light of that redeeming and liberating Word in its *lingual form* can we gain insight into the meaning of created reality" [emphasis added].

¹⁷ Here I am *not* claiming or even suggesting that open and libertarian theologians do not have a high view of Scripture but only that they do not apply this presupposition consistently in their theology. Below I will illustrate this more precisely.

task must be submitted to the judgment of Scripture if the truth is to be discovered.

2. The Comprehensive Truthfulness of Scripture

Secondly, the interpreter must presuppose that what God has declared in the Word is true in a comprehensive or plenary sense. Put simply, it must be assumed that all that God has spoken is, in fact, true. This presupposition is of special relevance in terms of defining God's nature and properties or who (or what) God is and what He is capable of accomplishing. Consequently, when God declares something about Himself in the written Word concerning a property He possesses (that He is invisible and immaterial, for example) or an ability or action that He has performed or is capable of (that He walked in the garden in the cool of the day), the interpreter must accept and affirm that everything Scripture claims or predicates of God is true even if the *way* that it is true is not apparent or stands in opposition to other areas of knowledge and personal intuitions about what is logically possible.¹⁸

3. The Logical Integrity of Scripture

Intrinsically connected with the previous assumption is a third critical presupposition which surfaces concerning the scriptural revelation. The interpreter must insist that, given the comprehensive truthfulness of the Word of God, the biblical revelation is also logically coherent in all that it declares. When it is equally affirmed in the Bible, for example, that the crucifixion was foreordained by God *and* carried out by morally accountable agents, the logical incongruity of these claims must be understood as *apparent*, not actual. In some cases, further study and keener insight into the language, cultural conditions, the author's specific purposes, and context of the biblical data will dissolve the apparent incongruity.¹⁹ In other instances,

¹⁸ This principle is exemplified in the perpetual creation-evolution debate. Those who affirm the biblical revelation (in its description of God's personal activity in the creation of the universe) could not accept the scientific findings that allegedly support the notion of random mutation on the macrocosmic level as an explanation for life on earth. The interpreter's pre-commitment to the biblical account of creation takes precedence over all scientific data (which, as history has proven, is subject to constant revision and refinement). Ultimately, there will be no conflict between what science discovers (about general revelation) and what Scripture teaches (by means of special revelation).

¹⁹ The difference in the details of the Gospel accounts of the resurrection of Christ is an example of such a case where the author's purpose sheds light on apparent inconsistencies among the Gospel writers.

however, the counterintuitive claims, many of those addressing the divine nature or depicting God’s space-time activities, must be allowed to stand unresolved as is the case with Acts 2:23 or other similar passages that predicate apparently contradictory statements about God. Consequently, if Scripture is inspired, the product of the very breath of God (2 Tim 3:15-16), the logical integrity of the biblical record must be assumed even when it is not readily apparent how certain of its claims may be reconciled.

4. The Infinite God of Scripture

The picture of God that develops in the biblical revelation is one of an *infinite* Being. As the exalted and sovereign King of all creation He exceeds the finite world by an immeasurable distance that is beyond intellectual traversal. This is true not only in terms of ontology—the very being of God—but also in terms of epistemology—what God knows and what can be known about Him. This presupposes that there are limits to what can be understood about God since it would require another infinite being to fully comprehend Him.²⁰ In this case, the interpreter must humbly admit that any quest for absolute, comprehensive knowledge of God and His ways is impossible.²¹ An infinite being simply cannot be limited within the scope of what finite creatures are capable of understanding or describing. Thus, the faithful theologian must humbly approach his task knowing full well that he is incapable of discovering or comprehending all there is to know about God and His ways.

It should be apparent how this presupposition comes into play in discussions of Classical Arminianism and in the recent debates over Open Theism. It would seem that free-will theists of all stripes, while not explicitly denying that God is infinite, do not do justice to divine infinity or incomprehensibility in their attempt to define the divine attributes and describe their function. This is most apparent in their definitions of *foreknowledge*. Most freewill theists understand foreknowledge as God’s perfect knowledge of what free creatures *will*

²⁰ Paul states as much in 1 Corinthians 2:10-11: “. . . for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God . . . Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God” (NASB).

²¹ It is here that the Reformed notion of the sufficiency of Scripture is critical. Even though we do not possess comprehensive or exhaustive knowledge about God, what He has chosen to reveal is true and is sufficient for salvation, worship, and service.

choose to do in the future, while Open theists understand the term to mean that God knows exhaustively *all that can be known* and, as defended throughout the literature of openness theology, the future acts of free creatures cannot be logically known even by God. I would argue that these positions on foreknowledge and human freedom (including those set forth by proponents of Middle Knowledge) are the tragic consequence of the explicit denial of the role of paradox in theology, particularly as it touches the divine nature, and that the infinity or transcendence of God is at least diminished if not ultimately rendered meaningless by such a move.

5. The Mysterious God of Scripture

Given the infinity of the divine Being, elements of *mystery* will naturally be present in the biblical revelation. Interpreters should understand this fact as the direct consequence of the nature of God, which Scripture reveals. Theological mysteries are present, therefore, where Scripture does not provide complete or satisfactory answers to every conceivable question that might be logically raised about God or the world that He has created and over which He rules. Paradoxes, or antinomies, are located at the intersection of scriptural truth-claims that are *prima facie* antithetical and counterintuitive. Wise interpreters, therefore, should not expect that every apparent theological problem or difficulty present in the biblical text can be or should be resolved, even by the application of sound hermeneutics and flawless theological reasoning. The reality is that there are, evidently, many truths about God only partly revealed in Scripture, truths that will be known only in heaven, if even then.²² This realization should compel interpreters to conduct theological studies in the spirit of humility, fully appreciating the fact that the Subject of their inquiry, though self-revealed in Scripture, is nonetheless shrouded in mystery.

²² I would argue that *some* theological problems may be resolved in heaven but not *all* since God remains infinite, and we remain creatures. He will always know more than we are capable of knowing, even in a glorified state. Furthermore, it would seem safe to assume that we will never know all there is to know about *God Himself*. Even His self-revelation to men in heaven will not exhaust the truth about His nature.

6. The Finitude of the Human Interpreter of Scripture

Finally, interpreters must be keenly aware of their own finitude and limitations as they engage in the task of theological reflection and study. We must appreciate the fact that we are finite creatures attempting to understand, explain, and define the One who is infinite in perfection. The interpreter, at best, sees only through a glass darkly, and what he does know about God and His ways is only partial (1 Cor 13:12). We are also sinners whose intellectual capacities have been profoundly affected by the fall (Rom 1:18; 2 Cor 4:3-4). Consequently, our conclusions, shaped and shaded by our own prejudices and sinful tendencies, are necessarily tenuous and subject to correction and the need for continual reform in the light of Scripture itself.²³

B. Affirming Both Poles of the Antinomy

A second suggestion I would offer has to do with how the counterintuitive claims of Scripture are understood and interpreted. Unfortunately, history bears witness to the fact that the mysterious declarations of Scripture have often been approached in an ‘either-or’ manner, or what Bruce Ware terms a “duality reductionism.”²⁴ The tendency has been to deny or reduce one set of propositions about God in favor of others that support or foster the interpreter’s agenda. For example, liberalism sacrificed divine transcendence for absolute immanence while Neo-orthodoxy reversed the error by virtually denying immanence in favor of absolute transcendence. This is also apparent in the contemporary debate over Open Theism, the most extreme form of libertarianism. Openness theologians have obviously determined to take the biblical implications of God’s nescience of the future and the affirmations of His emotions, changeableness, spatial

²³ To affirm *sola Scriptura* is not to deny the necessity of doing theology in the light of Church tradition and other disciplines. With Spykman, *Reformational Theology*, 77, I agree that tradition, the sciences, theology, and philosophy “all have their rightful place in the Christian community.” However, the only “unimpeachable standard” by which the Christian faith is to be evaluated is Scripture alone. Spykman, 77-78, also keenly observes that “sin with its profound and sweeping effect on our minds” is a constant threat to the theologian’s task. This fact manifests itself in the “reductionist tendencies” which have historically dogged classical liberalism, Neo-orthodoxy, and evangelical Christianity. I would argue that the same error is made in Open Theism and other free-will theologies.

²⁴ Bruce Ware, *God's Greater Glory: The Exalted God of Scripture and Faith* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 37.

location, and the like, as normative for their doctrine of God. Consequently, passages that depict God's transcendence, sovereignty, immutability, knowledge of the future, etc. are sacrificed in defense of the agent's libertarian freedom. The same may be said of classical Arminianism, with its denial of divine sovereignty in salvation, and some extreme versions of Calvinism/Augustinianism that reject, for example, the reality of creaturely choices or the emotionality of God in favor of an absolutistic view of the divine attributes. Ware wisely cautions, however, that

God's *full* self-revelation must be accepted by evangelical theology with the deep conviction that all of what God has disclosed of himself is important for our understanding, and that no part of it should be granted the regulatory function of a prime datum in its doctrine of God [emphasis his].²⁵

To illustrate this point, it is helpful to think of the biblical revelation as a pair of perfectly straight train rails. The interpreter stands in the middle of the tracks that extend in a flawlessly straight line and as far as he can see. Each rail represents a truth (or truths) that God has disclosed about Himself and is an essential element of the scriptural revelation. However, as the tracks disappear into the distance, the interpreter perceives that the rails intersect or collide. He is unable to see that, in reality, the rails continue to extend out even further in a parallel fashion. Their intersection is only *apparent*. In the same way, the Bible sets forth truths that appear to be hopelessly and irresolvably opposed. Scripture states, for instance, that God cannot be tempted by evil (Jas 1:13) but also affirms that Christ was, in fact, "tempted in all things" (Heb 4:15 NASB). The Bible also teaches that God timelessly knows and sees all things perfectly (Ps 33:13; Heb 4:13) and yet affirms that He "came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built" (Gen 11:5 NASB). Literally dozens of other such examples could be provided to illustrate this unique feature of the biblical revelation.

Given that each rail, or pole of the antinomy, represents the claims of Scripture, it follows that the interpreter must preserve the

²⁵ Ibid., 44. Ware, 43, states that, "God is who he is in his revelation, but God is infinitely beyond this limited self-disclosure. In a like manner, one must recognize that God's revelation in Christ Jesus is truly a revelation of God's essence, but there is no conflict if we immediately acknowledge that the full content of his self-disclosure to humans is broader than that given in Jesus and that his own nature surpasses even the total revelation he has offered to his creatures."

integrity of both even though they appear to be irreconcilable. This means that it is a fundamental error to discount or diminish one in favor of the other. In the case of open theology, the error has been that of treating the sovereignty or transcendence side of the tracks as subservient to the immanence side. This has resulted in a distortion of the whole biblical portrait of God, one that has diminished and diffused His glory. To avoid this methodological error, open theists and libertarians need to approach the sovereignty/transcendence passages with the same degree of confidence and trust they have given to the immanence passages. The same can be said of those instances where the Scriptures affirm the free moral agency of humans on the one hand and the comprehensive sovereignty of God over all events on the other. Both rails of the biblical revelation must be affirmed as providing *true* information about God, yet in a way that leaves room for the mystery and incomprehensibility of His nature and actions.

C. Maintaining the Creator–Creature Dialectic

That the God of Holy Scripture is transcendent indicates the presence of an infinite distance between Him and the finite world that He has freely created. There is, therefore, a vast difference and distinction between the Creator and the creature that must be acknowledged and appreciated by the interpreter. This is another way of saying that the theologian's task is to reflect upon the Being and works of God, as guided by Scripture, in full recognition of his creaturely status and total dependence upon God for those gifts and abilities essential for the interpretation and application of biblical truth. Scripture is unequivocal in its affirmation that there exists not only a vast ontological and moral distinction between the Creator and the creature (1 Ki 8:27; Acts 17:24-25) but also an equally measureless epistemic distinction as well (Job 36:26; Isa 55:8-9). To the degree that the theologian humbly recognizes this difference and the practical implications growing from it that inform and govern the theological enterprise,²⁶ God's incomprehensibility will be properly

²⁶ Such practical implications would include 1) the realization that our best interpretive efforts will fall short of capturing the full magnitude of the revealed truth, particularly that dealing with the nature and works of God, 2) consequently, there will be many irresolvable theological and interpretive difficulties that will arise at various points, and 3) that humility should be the atmosphere of theological reflection, especially in those areas where Scripture is silent and also in matters of secondary importance.

accounted for in the interpretive process. However, when the human interpreter unwittingly exalts himself to a level incommensurate with his creaturely status by ignoring or diluting certain biblical affirmations about God's Being and activities in the service of some theological agenda or unwarranted philosophical presupposition, this critical distinction is lost, and a distorted concept of God inevitably results.²⁷

D. Interpreting the Anthropomorphic Descriptions

Finally, it is apparent that much of the controversy surrounding free-will and openness theology centers on how Scripture's many anthropomorphic depictions of God should be interpreted, primarily those dealing with emotion, change, temporality and nescience of the future.²⁸ Scripture is literally filled with passages that portray God in human terms or as having human traits and characteristics.²⁹ Included among these are images of God's arm (Deut 33:27), back (Jer 18:17), body (Ezek 8:1), breath (Ps 33:6), face (Ex 33:20), eyes (Ps 33:18), feet (2 Sam 22:10), nostrils (2 Sam 22:16), tongue (Isa 30:27), and fingers (Ps 8:3). He is also described as engaging in human activities such as waking (Gen 3:8), standing (Amos 7:7), smelling (Gen 8:21), remembering (Ps 78:39), laughing (Ps 2:4), sitting (Ps 29:10), hearing (Isa 59:2), and giving birth (Deut 32:18). The obvious question related to such biblical descriptions of the divine nature and activities has to do with how the interpreter should view the attribution of

²⁷ This is essentially a repetition of the sin of Adam and Eve (Gen 3:1-7). The serpent tempted them by holding out hope that the human creatures could know what God knows (v. 5). Thus, at its heart the original sin certainly involved a level of epistemological pride that caused them to question the truthfulness of God's previous revelation (2:16-17) in addition to sinfully assuming that they could understand and know all that God knows.

²⁸ Technically, predications of human emotion to God are referred to as *anthropopathisms*. See Ex 20:5; Job 19:11; Isa 62:4; Ezek 5:13; Zeph 3:8; Rom 9:13.

²⁹ There are a number of significant treatments of the biblical anthropomorphisms from theologians representing various perspectives. Among the more helpful are the following: Norman L. Geisler, "Analogy: The Only Answer to the Problem of Religious Language," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 16: 3 (Summer 1973): 168-179; Peter Forrest, "How Can We Speak of God? How Can We Speak of Anything?" *Philosophy of Religion* 29 (1991): 33-52; Frederick Ferre, "Is Language About God Fraudulent?" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 12 (1959): 337-360; Terrence E. Fretheim, "The Repentance of God: A Key to Evaluating Old Testament God-Talk," 47-70; Vincent Brummer, *Speaking of A Personal God: An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992): 33-67; John McIntyre, "Analogy," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 12 (1959): 1-20; Lester J. Kuypers, "The Suffering and Repentance of God," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 22 (1969): 257-277; Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Anthropomorphism in Hellenism and Judaism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 127: 507 (July 1970): 213-222; Keith Ward, *Religion and Creation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996): 128-155.

human characteristics to God. Should these passages be interpreted literally, or should they be viewed in a figurative or metaphorical sense only?³⁰

As indicated above, libertarian and openness theologians typically understand *certain* biblical anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms as indicating literal truth about God's nature and attributes. For example, Greg Boyd asserts that the episode of the testing of Abraham's faith recorded in Genesis 22 provides unmistakable evidence of God's nescience of future free decisions.³¹ Having witnessed Abraham's unyielding devotion and faithfulness, God declares in verse 12: "[N]ow I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me" (NASB). Boyd claims that this passage confronts the interpreter with the fact that God did not know beforehand what Abraham would do, thus the test was divinely mandated in order to discover the true nature of the patriarch's faith. Consequently, the passage "has no clear meaning if God was certain that Abraham would fear him before he offered up his son."³² However, when the Scripture declares that God's "eyes" have beheld man's "unformed substance" and that each of man's days have been eternally ordained by God, "when as yet there was not one of them" (Ps 139:16 NASB), Boyd declares that this passage should be taken metaphorically: "The point of this passage is to poetically express God's care for the Psalmist from his conception, not to resolve metaphysical disputes regarding the nature of the future."³³ This illustrates the problem with the approach typically found among libertarian advocates when appealing to the anthropomorphic passages. The tendency is to regard certain of these descriptions as normative, or fundamentally determinative, in regard to the divine

³⁰ J. Daniel Hays, "Anthropomorphism, Revelation, and the Nature of God in the Old Testament," [online] Zondervan Academic, 2003, cited 1 February 2010, available from <<http://www.zondervanchurchsource.com>>. Hays provides some helpful guidelines on the interpretation of anthropomorphic language. He distinguishes four types of biblical metaphors: idioms, poetic metaphors, narrative actions or statements by God, and theophany. Each gives us *true* information about God, but not in a comprehensive sense.

³¹ Compare the conclusions of Robert B. Chisolm Jr., "Divine Uncertainty and Discovery: Anatomy of an Anthropomorphism," [online] Zondervan Academic, 2004, cited 1 February 2010, available from <<http://www.zondervanchurchsource.com>>.

³² Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 64.

³³ *Ibid.*, 41.

nature. In other words, the biblical descriptions that best serve the presuppositions of the libertarian model are held out as advancing *literal* truth about the divine nature while others, those that would tend to militate against their assumptions, are dismissed as *symbolic* or metaphorical.³⁴

A more faithful approach, however, is to avoid the temptation to interpret any anthropomorphic description in *isolation* from the balance of the scriptural revelation. Such depictions of the divine Being and actions must be governed by the wider context of the biblical data in such a way that no one anthropomorphism, or class of anthropomorphisms, becomes normative or is understood in an absolute sense. For example, the Scripture's description of God's hands (Isa 49:16) should not be interpreted in isolation from passages describing God as non-material (John 4:24), those detailing God's remembering (Ps 78:39) from those that speak of God's omniscience (Prov 5:21), or others which speak of God as spatially and temporally located (Deut 2:7) from those affirming His omnitemporality and omnipresence (Jer 23:23).³⁵

It is also critical for interpreters to understand the *analogical*³⁶ nature of such anthropomorphic statements.³⁷ For instance, when God is said to change His mind, relent, or regret some previous action, or express varied emotions, the nature of this change, relenting, regretting, or emoting is vastly different than that of the finite

³⁴ For an Arminian (Seventh Day Adventist) response to the openness hermeneutic see Conrad C. Gren, "God's Repentance: Paradox of Divine Foreknowledge and Emotion," [online] Zondervan Academic, 2001, cited 1 February 2010, available from <<http://www.zondervanchurchsource.com>>.

³⁵ The same holds *vice versa*. For example, passages speaking of God's immutability should not be interpreted in isolation from those espousing His changeability as if there is no sense in which God may be said to *change*. It is true that some classical theologians have also absolutized certain divine properties or biblical descriptions in much the same way as their openness counterparts.

³⁶ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles, Book One: God*, trans. Anton C. Pegis (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003): 147-148.

³⁷ See: Michael S. Horton, "When God Lisps: An Analogical Account of Divine Repentance," [online] Zondervan Academic, 2001, cited 1 February 2010, available from <<http://www.zondervanchurchsource.com>>. Horton argues, correctly I believe, that all biblical language is analogical, not just certain portions of it. This being the case, he cautions that "we can never rest on one analogy and 'translate' it into a univocal predicate. This translation error may be done by Calvinists as well as open theists, as whenever God's simplicity is denied in favor of either his sovereignty or his love. When this occurs, the object of theology is no longer a personal God but an abstract attribute that is now said to be God's essence. An analogical approach, therefore, in order to work properly, must listen to *the symphony of biblical analogies*, knowing that none of the analogies by itself can be reduced to the whole (univocal) score" [emphasis added].

creature.³⁸ The manner in which God displays feelings, changes His “mind,” or regrets some previous decision is analogous to the manner in which humans change their minds and express emotion. Stated conversely, the way that humans exercise their wills and display their emotions reflects the abilities and attributes of their Maker. However, since God is the infinite, incomprehensible Creator and man is His finite image-bearer, these concepts are not to be interpreted *univocally* or as sharing a precise one-to-one correspondence. The same may be said for other anthropomorphic or anthropopathic descriptions that must also be understood analogically if the Creator–creature distinction is to be properly maintained.³⁹ In the end, these biblically authorized depictions of God are designed to display the glory and majesty of God in language and concepts that may be understood by finite creatures. However, the interpreter must remember that these descriptions, while true, do not *exhaustively* define the nature and

³⁸ Richard A. Muller, “Incarnation, Immutability, and the Case for Classical Theism,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 45 (Spring 1983): 23-40, makes this point in his defense of the classical understanding of the divine attributes. He appeals, 33, to the fact that there must be “logically prior” truths that govern the interpretation of the anthropomorphisms. In the case of divine repentance, for instance, passages that teach that God is unchanging take priority in the interpretation of those indicating His repentance or regret. While I see his point and affirm its merits to some degree, I believe this move ultimately commits the same error of the openness model by effectively evacuating the analogy of its meaning, thereby sacrificing one analogical predication for the sake of another. Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 562-563, has a better proposal. He argues, for example, that, “relenting is a part of [God’s] very nature as the Lord. He is the Lord who relents.” He claims that, based upon Joel 2:13-14 and Jonah 4:1-2, it is no word game “to say that relenting is part of God’s unchangeable nature.” This approach does justice to the full biblical text and leaves sufficient room for the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility by resisting the temptation to go beyond the bounds of Scripture in the attempt to define *how* such biblically affirmed actions are possible.

³⁹ See Jay Wesley Richards, *The Untamed God: A Philosophical Exploration of Divine Perfection, Simplicity, and Immutability* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 120-125. Richards observes, 121, that “the theologian who [wrongly] uses the *analogia entis* commits the disastrous error of interpreting divine revelation according to a general and abstract concept of being, which we use to *understand creatures in the finite realm*. By doing so, the theologian restricts God by circumscribing God and creatures under a *general concept*” [emphasis added]. Richards, 122, agrees, that there may be some “proper analogical predication” of God and man, but such analogical similarity exists “not because God and the creature share some third thing, such as being, wisdom, goodness or knowledge. Rather, these properties reside preeminently in God and only partially and derivatively in creatures.” Ultimately, the exact relationship between such anthropomorphic passages is beyond comprehension or description. Michael Horton, “When God Lisps,” clarifies this point by observing that “there are not two contradictory lines of proof-texts, one line pro-openness; the other pro-classical theism. Rather, there are two lines of analogy acting as guardrails to keep us on the right path. There is *real change*, dynamic interaction and partnership in the covenant (*Deus revalatus pro nos*). At the same time, *God is not like the human partner* in that he does not repent the way the latter repents: God transcends the narrative (*Deus Absconditus in se*)” [emphasis added]. I would argue that these often-counterintuitive representations of God’s nature and works are intended to drive us to passionate worship and fervent devotion.

works of God but only serve the creature by providing a basis from which God may be known and worshipped.

III. A Call to Worship the Incomprehensible God

As I have stated earlier, my main concern has been that libertarian models of divine sovereignty and human freedom unwittingly domesticate the God of Scripture and diffuse His glory. Such a fact prompts me to ask what is it, precisely, that compels us to worship? This is a complex question indeed, and its full explication is well beyond the scope of this essay. However, is it not self-evident that one of the primary (if not *the* primary) factors or motives for worship is our awareness of that which is transcendent or awe-inspiring.⁴⁰ Is it not also self-evident that God has endowed us with an inherent appreciation of that which is beyond us and timelessly shrouded in mystery—an awareness that has survived the fall largely intact even to the degree that there is a universal (if not suppressed) awareness of God among all men everywhere (Rom 1:19-20)? Israel's ancient Preacher also declared that the Creator has "set eternity" within the heart of His human creatures (Ecc 3:11). With this basic principle in view, the relationship between the doctrine of God's incomprehensibility and the practice of worship becomes evident. To the degree that men are cognizant of God's transcendent grandeur *and* His equally indescribable immanence, worship will be enflamed with creaturely zeal and passion.⁴¹

This principle may be illustrated from what is, perhaps, the Old Testament's *locus classicus* on biblical worship, Isaiah 6:1-8 and the

⁴⁰ For a critique of libertarian theology and worship see A. J. Smith, "Worthy of Worship?," [online] Zondervan Academic, 2001, cited 1 February 2010, available from <<http://www.zondervanchurchsource.com>>. Smith argues that, given the attributes of God as defined in openness, He is not worthy of the kind of worship commanded in Scripture. In defense of the relationship between mystery and worship see John H. Whittaker, "Religious and Epistemological Mysteries," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 54 (2003): 137-156; Cyril Roddy, "God Incomprehensible," *Expository Times* 109: 8 (May 1998): 237-238; Arlan P. Dohrenburg, "The Presence of God in a Mystery," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 52 (October 1958): 17-20.

⁴¹ Richard P. Hansen, "Biblical Paradox Offers an Alternative to 'How To' Sermons," *Leadership* (Winter 2000): 55-60, offers a brilliant treatment of the essential relationship between divine incomprehensibility and worship, primarily in terms of preaching. Hansen, 60, calls upon pastors to unapologetically proclaim both sides of the biblical paradoxes, knowing that this will inspire vigorous worship and devotion and will also inoculate the Church against the heresies that commonly spring from scriptural paradoxes that have had their handles "whittled down." He concludes, 60, that biblical paradox "beckons us into Mystery, and offers a wholesome reminder that God is infinitely greater than our ideas about God."

stunning account of the prophet's life-changing encounter with Yahweh.⁴² From this account, the relationship of worship to one's understanding and awareness of God's utter incomprehensibility may be discerned from three essential features of the text.⁴³

A. The Upward Look: A Vision of God

In verses 1-4, the prophet Isaiah encounters Yahweh in a spectacular theophanic vision. The description provided in the text is profoundly penetrating with its display of the *immanence* of God—by means of its anthropomorphic features including the vision of Yahweh “sitting on the throne” (v1) while encompassed about by the “Seraphim” (v2)—and *transcendence* of God—by means of the seraph song extolling the holiness and omnipresence of God (v3). Consequently, the passage is squarely focused upon the paradoxical reality that God is both unapproachable, shielded by an impenetrable mystery as the thrice-Holy One, *and* equally present and subject to some degree of apprehension and definition by the worshipper. That is, by the juxtaposition of divine properties associated with transcendence and immanence, the text displays the fact that God has *revealed* Himself as incomprehensible. As will be noted below, this vision of God functions as the motivating force behind the prophet's worship (vv. 5-7) and his subsequent personal surrender to the divine will (v8).

B. The Inward Look: A Vision of Self

Having seen God in His ineffable glory (vv1-2, 4) and heard the confirmatory confession of the Seraphim, (“Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts,” v3), the prophet then became keenly aware of his sinfulness and pronounced the prophetic word of divine judgment, (“woe is me,” v5), upon himself. As indicated by the latter part of

⁴² It is not my purpose here to provide a detailed exegesis of this passage but simply to highlight and apply the obvious features of this amazing vision. For these insights regarding worship I am deeply indebted to Dr. J. "Boo" Helflin, my former professor for Old Testament and Hebrew at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas (1981-1984).

⁴³ See Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 151. Regarding this passage, Vos notes that the coexistence of transcendence and immanence, or notions of “trustful approach to God” and “reverence for the divine majesty,” is typical of biblical religion. He claims, furthermore, that Jesus Himself exemplified it in His teaching on prayer in the Sermon on the Mount. There Jesus teaches us to “address God as Father, [and then] He immediately adds to this the qualification ‘in heaven,’ lest the love and trust towards God should fall to the level of irreligious familiarity with God.”

verse 5, the direct antecedent to the prophet's confession of his moral and spiritual corruption was his vision of the incomprehensibly holy God: ("For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts").⁴⁴ The principle that naturally follows from this is that true worship is prompted by a vision of God as holy, with all of its implications for transcendence, immanence, paradox, mystery, and final incomprehensibility, and provides the basis by which the worshipper may gain a proper understanding of his own finitude and depravity and, as a consequence, his need of cleansing grace. Conversely, without such a clear appreciation for God's identity as the Holy One, the worshipper is less inclined toward adoration, the realization of personal sin, and humble contrition before the divine Majesty.

C. The Outward Look: A Vision of the World in Need

Having come to an awareness of the sinfulness of his own heart (v5), and having experienced the cleansing grace of God (vv6-7), the prophet turned his attention outward to the world as alienated from God and in need of salvation (vv8-13). Without question, the vision of Yahweh in His incomprehensible holiness awakened an extraordinary compassion for the world within the heart of the prophet. Upon hearing the compelling question from the heavenly throne (v8), ("Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"), Isaiah, with his heart now aflame in faith toward God and love for the world, immediately surrendered to the divine call to take God's message of impending judgment to the nations.

This passage powerfully reveals the central significance of the divine self-revelation for the proper worship and adoration of God. When New Covenant worshippers similarly see God in His incomprehensible glory through the medium of the written (and proclaimed) Word, they are channeled into a healthy and redemptive awareness of their own sin as well as the beauty and sufficiency of the divine grace. This, in turn, prompts humble surrender to the divine will and the faithful, fervent service of God's salvific purposes in the world. That is, worship that is both prompted and governed by the full biblical revelation of God as incomprehensibly transcendent *and* immanent leads to a life of humble and dedicated service. However,

⁴⁴ The three-fold predication of holiness to God by the seraphim is certainly significant as an expression of divine infinity and, consequently, incomprehensibility.

to the degree that God's self-revelation is distorted by unbelief, intellectual pride, or other selfish motives, worship and service will be corrupted.

D. Summary: Resting and Worshipping in Theological Paradox

In the Isaiah 6 passage it is apparent that the (morally and intellectually) overwhelming vision of God ultimately resulted in the prophet's discovery of his place and purpose in the world. One might say that it was at the throne of the incomprehensible God that he found himself.⁴⁵ What may be gleaned from this is the fact that theological paradox and mystery are actually the friends of worship and faith, not their enemy, as typically believed by many, including the architects of the openness proposal and other libertarians. It is the divine mystery and hiddenness that magnetically draws the child of God into authentic worship, warm fellowship, fervent adoration, and disciplined service. It is within the fact that God is *known*, but also *unknown*, that the servant of God discovers the proper incentive to trust Him, knowing that while the divine hand of providence may not be fully traced out, His loving heart may be trusted to work all things both for His glory and the good of His beloved children (Rom 8:28-29).⁴⁶ Trust in God's secret, providential workings in the details of human history is then an indispensable component of authentic Christianity. This central theme resonates throughout Scripture, and its constant echoing calls every believer to rest in the certainty that God is at work in the world, bringing about His eternal plans and purposes through the exercise of His wisdom and power.⁴⁷ Rather than being disturbed and discomfited by the presence of mystery and paradox in the Christian faith, believers in Christ should, therefore, find profound comfort in the fact that the God they serve and love is the God who has no equal, who has determined the beginning and the

⁴⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.1, classically articulates this by affirming that the knowledge of self begins with the knowledge of God. Thus, man truly knows himself only as he knows his Creator and Redeemer: "For in the first place, no man can survey himself without forthwith turning his thoughts toward the God in whom he lives and moves."

⁴⁶ B. A. Gerrish, "To the Unknown God: Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God," *The Journal of Religion* 53:3 (1973): 263-292.

⁴⁷ Note, for example: Deut 4:39; 1 Chron 29:11-12; 2 Chron 20:6; Ps 22:27, 42:2-9, 66:7, 83:18, 93:1-2, 115:3; Isa 37:16, 45:15; Jer 10:10; Lam 5:19; Dan 2:20-21, 4:34-35; Rom 11:36; 1 Tim 1:17, 6:15; Rev 19:6.

end of all things, whose purposes shall not be thwarted or resisted, who does as He pleases, and who brings to fruition each of His plans by means of the mysterious interaction of human freedom and divine sovereignty (Isa 46:8-11).⁴⁸

Conclusion: Understanding True Freedom—A Simple Suggestion

I have noted that theologians and philosophers on all sides of the issue have vigorously debated the compatibility of human autonomy and divine foreknowledge principally in terms of *compatibilistic* freedom versus *libertarian* freedom.⁴⁹ While there have been many helpful and healthy consequences resulting from these academic exchanges and the attempts to clarify and define the very concept of freedom itself, there is, perhaps, a critical element that has gone unnoticed amidst the continual volleying. It would seem that, given the incomprehensible Being and activities of God in the world, the exact nature of human autonomy and moral freedom is ultimately *unrevealed* and, therefore, unknown.⁵⁰ This is certainly not to suggest or even remotely imply that the academic debates over freedom and foreknowledge do not serve a legitimate purpose, or that there should not be an attempt to explore and define the relationship of human agency to divine sovereignty as both guided and restrained by the Scriptures, but that in the final analysis human freedom can only be understood as *the liberty to do what the Bible affirms is possible for morally accountable human agents*. Admittedly, this is a very simple proposal and likely has the effect of prompting quick criticism if not wide yawns. However, it would seem wise to conclude that the Creator, not the creature, defines *true* freedom.⁵¹ And since He is the

⁴⁸ NIV: “Remember this, fix it in mind, take it to heart, you rebels. ⁹ Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. ¹⁰ I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please. ¹¹ From the east I summon a bird of prey; from a far-off land, a man to fulfill my purpose. What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do.”

⁴⁹ Bruce A. Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 61-160, presents an able defense of compatibilistic freedom based on a modified middle knowledge scheme. His criticism of libertarian freedom is also quite compelling and convincingly displays the logical incongruity of the major assertions of openness theology.

⁵⁰ George H. Tavard, "The Mystery of Divine Providence," *Theological Studies* 64 (2003): 707-718.

⁵¹ Bruce A. Ware, "Robots, Royalty and Relationships? Toward a Clarified Understanding of Real Human Relations With the God Who Knows and Decrees All that Is," [online] Zondervan Academic, 2002, cited 1 February 2010, available from <<http://www.zondervanchurchsource.com>>. Ware makes the point that it is a mistake to define “real” relationships by using human-to-human relationships as the paradigm. Rather, since God transcends us and is, therefore, “not like us in so many ways, it stands to [Footnote continued on next page ...]

God that Scripture reveals Him to be, in all His truth, goodness, justice, holiness, mercy, and wisdom, He can be trusted to govern our lives in such a way that our integrity as persons made in His very image and likeness is held intact. Thus, human agents are really free to make choices and God is justified in holding them morally accountable for these choices even though they fall within the scope of the divine ordination and omniscience. Additionally, both the exercise of human freedom and the dispensing of divine accountability and judgment occur within the arena of God's incomprehensible nature and actions in the world of time and space. While this conclusion regarding the relationship between divine sovereignty/omniscience and human freedom/accountability is admittedly unsatisfying at the intellectual level, it nonetheless represents the essential facts of the biblical revelation concerning the way God interacts with moral agents. Scripture simply asserts that men are free and responsible before God, and that God is the Sovereign Lord of all things, including the future free decisions of human agents. Ultimately, even the best efforts at explanation fall short of the reality they seek to make clear. To state this in simpler terms, the precise nature of human freedom, and the exact manner in which it is exercised under the auspices of God's comprehensive sovereignty and exhaustive knowledge of the future, is itself hidden within the "secret things" of God's incomprehensibility.

Finally, I would argue that this model of compatibilistic freedom has practical consequences for worship and Christian piety in that it not only preserves the basic integrity of divine sovereignty/omniscience and human choice/accountability but also gives proper weight to the notion of divine incomprehensibility. Therefore, as an expression of personal worship, we must diligently seek to use our freedom as Scripture enjoins us, and we should do so in ways that seek to honor God and serve His kingdom. Yet, each of us who believe in the Savior should also find significant comfort and confidence in the reality that all of our choices and actions, even those that violate His revealed will, will ultimately serve the greater

reason that our relationship with him will likewise be different in many ways, and yet it is no less *real*" [emphasis his]. This principle may also be applied to issues of human freedom as well.

purposes of God and the good of His people.⁵² Then we can endure the sufferings of this life and the painful consequences of the choices of others with hope and even joy.



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⁵² Obviously, I am presupposing (following the Reformed model) that God's will may be understood as composed of two aspects: His secret sovereign (decretive) will and His revealed (preceptive) will. For a contemporary defense of this position see John Piper, "Are There Two Wills in God? Divine Election and God's Desire for All to Be Saved," in *The Grace of God, The Bondage of the Will* ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995): 107-131.
