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**Does a Sovereign God Love Humanity Less than a God Limited by Human Freedom?**

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**Introduction**

A sovereign God is a God who does not leave the running of his creation to chance but exercises dominion over all his creation. The sovereignty of God, God's absolute, indefeasible and irresistible regulation of all of creation—men and things, both in heaven and on earth, good and evil, moral and immoral—without leaving anything to chance, pervades the text of Scripture.<sup>3</sup> God's actual dominion over the entire universe is what his sovereignty consists in. God's creation

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<sup>2</sup> See [www.clemson.edu](http://www.clemson.edu), Clemson, S.C. 29634, (864) 656-3311.

<sup>3</sup> Millard J. Erickson writes of sovereignty, "the biblical revelation mentions it." This is not a mere understatement. It is immense with respect to the Scripture. Yet this should be taken as an oversight because Erickson's discussion reflects that key theological figures in history held the doctrine and they were brought to such a position by a serious study of the Scripture. He writes that it was not Augustine's experience that "determined what he found in Scripture." But that "his experience sensitized him, enabling him to identify what he found there, and thus to understand it better" (908). He wrote of Luther that "as he studied the Scriptures and also the writings of Augustine, however, his views began to change" and was reflected in his notes on Romans (912). See also Lewis and Demarest survey of the Biblical teaching in *Integrative Theology* (1:299-310) shows that the doctrine pervades every division of the Scripture.

always fulfills his sovereign will. No one or nothing in the entire universe can thwart God's will, since God is omnipotent.<sup>4</sup>

This doctrine has been disputed throughout the history of the church primarily because the doctrine apparently comes into conflict with the love of God and has difficulty absolving God of responsibility for sin, and as a result disposing of the problem of evil. The contemporary challenge to the doctrine comes from freewill theism (sometimes referred to as open theism). Freewill theism holds that God's sovereignty is limited by human freedom. That is, since God decided to create free creatures God does not and cannot control the choices of those creatures, and in consequence God cannot know the decisions those creatures will make prior to their making them. The human will is, then, placed outside the boundaries of God's sovereignty. If God has dominion in the contingent acts of a person then such a person cannot be said to be meaningfully free. Freewill theism has made love the central attribute of God and declared the love of God to be incompatible with a divine sovereignty, which extends to the choices of God's human creatures. This view does not deny that God is sovereign in some areas—his own independent acts, over his nonhuman creatures, etc. Yet, for the freewill theist any interference in the decisions of free creatures is a violation of their freedom. Thus, God's sovereignty is not restricted in the sense that God interferes with human decisions in a way that does not void human freedom. Rather it is restricted in the absolute sense that any involvement in human decisions would vitiate freedom. Thus, this view limits God's omnipotence. However, God's omnipotence is not the only victim of freewill theism; God's omniscience is also limited. Changing the starting point of the debate from God's self-disclosure given in the Scripture, freewill theism has emphasized what it refers to as the content of omniscience—what can and cannot be known logically. Placing aspects of the future in this category, it holds that God lacks comprehensive knowledge because

there are some aspects of the future that cannot be known with certainty by anyone, including God. This is not because of any deficiency in God's knowledge, but because it is the inherent nature of the future to be indefinite.

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<sup>4</sup> See Stephen Charnock 2:364ff, for a discussion of God's dominion (Charnock's term for sovereignty) and its relation to the other attributes.

God knows with certainty those aspects of the future that are already fixed and certain, and he knows as indefinite those aspects of the future that are, as of now, open and indefinite. (It would hardly be a perfection in God's knowledge to "know" as certain and definite something that is in fact uncertain and indefinite!) (Peterson et al. 185).<sup>5</sup>

Given the implications of freewill theism for the nature of God, the importance of an unrestricted sovereignty for Biblical faith cannot be overstated. For not only does the very Godhood of God rest on his complete sovereignty over creation such that to deny dominion to God is to deny that God is God<sup>6</sup> but also the Christian's faithfulness to God and ability to respond coherently to modernity is threatened.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Not to be particularly fussy but not only is this statement incoherent it is also not consistent with the data of revealed Scripture. First, it claims that "it is the inherent nature of the future to be indefinite" while claiming that the inherently indefinite future has certain and fixed aspects. Second, there is no reason not to distinguish between what humans can know and what God can know. The Bible consistently makes this distinction. God's knowledge of the future is not given in the Bible as fallible intelligent guesses. The Bible also does set up the future in such a way that human actions and divine actions are independent of each other. Sometimes God bringing about his own plans require human participation. If human actions are not certain, how can God guarantee his plan? How can God bring forth his son at "the fullness of time" and have Romans and Jews cooperate in crucifying him in accordance with prophecy? The claim of open theism that "much prophecy is conditional" (Peterson et al., 187) is inadequate because if only one prophecy is unconditional God's knowledge of contingent human acts cannot be denied. If in that instance God violated human freedom, we can hold that humans are not meaningfully free but we cannot say that God does not rule in the affairs of men. In addition, philosophy cannot settle the issue as to whether human choices are independent of God's control or not. Only God's revelation can. (See David Widerker who identifies moderate libertarians as those who do not think the libertarian thesis—"Some of the actions we perform are free, that is, within our control in the sense that it was within our power *not* to perform them"—can be proved (Widerker, 87). He goes on to argue that Strong Agent-Causal Libertarians have attempted unsuccessfully to establish the thesis.)

<sup>6</sup> Arthur W. Pink identifies sovereignty with the very being of God: "To say that God is sovereign is to declare that God is God. To say that God is sovereign is to declare that He is the Most High" (19). Charnock writes, "This notion of sovereignty is inseparable from the notion of a God. To acknowledge the existence of a God, and to acknowledge him a rewarder, are linked together.... To acknowledge him a rewarder, is to acknowledge him a governor; rewards being the marks of dominion" (2:365). Even Stanley J. Grenz, prior to defining God's sovereignty out of existence, agrees with Wolfhart Panneberg that "the very deity of God is bound up with his sovereignty over the universe" because "A God whose will and design is never fulfilled is in the end not the ultimate reality" (140).

<sup>7</sup> In a chapter entitled, "the location of ultimacy and the attributes of God" Wright discusses a debate between Pinnock and the non-Christian Delwin Brown to show the inadequacy of Pinnock's new mediating position for dealing with the questions of modernity. The gist of the argument is that after accepting the premises of the enlightenment Pinnock could not without severe inconsistency reject the logical outcome. That is, by limiting the creator instead of the creation Pinnock could not avoid self-contradiction (205-232, especially 223). This danger does not only apply to the denial of the whole doctrine but applies even when aspects of the doctrine is denied. Deists thought they could keep God as creator while denying his constant involvement in the universe. Yet as James Sire points out, deism became only a halfway house between theism and naturalism. One could not be a deist long without realizing that if the world could run without God why does it need a divine origin (Sire, 59). The impact on evangelism is also evident in the contemporary church's passion for gimmicks as opposed to faithful articulation of the message of the gospel. David Wells fittingly describes this phenomenon: "The fundamental problem in the evangelical world today is that God rests too inconsequentially upon the [Footnote continued on next page ... ]

In addition, it threatens the ordinary reading of the Scripture, which is the Christian's starting point.

I will begin by asserting unequivocally that a sovereign God, as defined above, does not love humanity less than a God limited by human freedom does. Since this question intends a specific dialogue, I will first clarify that what makes for the dispute is that one side appears to preserve the love of God at the expense of his omnipotence and omniscience while the other side appears to preserve God's omnipotence and omniscience at the expense of his love. Since I am assuming that all three of these are required by the Biblical revelation, if it can be demonstrated that Calvinism can account for love as well as the other two, then it provides an account more in accord with the Scriptures. Then I will argue that given certain Biblical claims, only a sovereign God can love humanity. I will do this by demonstrating that this position not only presents an internally coherent system but also is a more coherent account of the Biblical data.

#### **A. The Concept of a Sovereign God in Dispute**

The term 'sovereignty of God' is used here in accordance with the traditional concept of sovereignty, referring to God's actual rule broadly speaking. Several distinctions may be made within the broader category. These distinctions may concern God's control over his own actions, God's control over non-human creatures, and God's control over his fallen human creatures. Within the latter further distinctions can be made. Millard J. Erickson distinguishes these by the use of three different terms: Foreordination, predestination, and election. Predestination is put midway between foreordination and election: Foreordination, which is equivalent to our term sovereignty,

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church. His truth is too distant, his grace is too ordinary, his judgment too benign, his gospel is too easy, and his Christ is too common" (30). Later in the same work Wells writes, "Technique is being substituted for truth, marketing action for thought, the satisfaction of the individual for the health of the church, a therapeutic vision of the world for a doctrinal vision, the unmanageable by the manageable, organism by organization, those who can preach the word of God by those who can manage an organization, the spiritual by the material. At the center of these substitutions is an individualism fired by a shallow, self centered consumerism. And along with this and because of it, has come a debilitating loss of truth—and behind that there lies the loss of awareness of god as objective and transcendent" (86-87). The disbelief in sovereignty may not be the only culprit, yet it plays a major role and is sufficient for its production. For it is difficult to see how having given up God's sovereignty in salvation one can continue to faithfully preach a difficult gospel to which human is by nature resistant. The very futility of the task is wearisome. Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A Demarest correctly point out that this doctrine relieves us from thinking that the weight of the world is on our shoulders (1:328-329).

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is the broadest term, while predestination is a midway term limited to “God’s choice of individuals for eternal life or eternal death.” Election is limited to that aspect of foreordination in which God selects some for eternal life, “the positive side of predestination” (Erickson, 908).<sup>8</sup> Foreordination (sovereignty) is about everything that happens in God’s creation, predestination concerns all that pertains to salvation positive or negative, and election is concerned with only the positive side of predestination—God’s choice of those who will be saved. In foreordination, God not only permits sin but restrains some sin and uses some human evil to bring him praise. Predestination and election are the aspects of sovereignty with which our question is particularly concerned. One can neither deny predestination nor election without also denying foreordination, nor can one consistently deny God’s actual rule without denying the God of the Bible.

Stanley Grenz makes an attempt to retain the word “sovereignty” while depriving it of its traditional meaning. For Grenz God’s actual sovereignty in creation cannot be begrudged and is illustrated by the potter’s relation to the clay. God can make what he wants. Yet God does not act only sovereignly but God acts in sovereign love to his creation. Grenz then asks, “To what extent can we truly confess that God is sovereign over creation?” (139). In response, he argues that the presence of evil in the world indicates that God’s will is not being done in the world, and hence God’s sovereignty is limited and the creation is in some sense autonomous. Grenz justifies this by distinguishing “between present and final realities of God’s sovereignty and between *de jure* and *de facto* sovereignty” (140). Beginning with final sovereignty, he argues that God is sovereign in this sense because the culmination of history rests on God bringing to pass his final goal for the world. It is not obvious that this is the case in the present. We can attribute present sovereignty to God not in the strict sense of sovereignty but rather in the sense that since God’s own activity points toward the future and the future is sovereignly in God’s hands, God is sovereign in the present (140-141). The second distinction will make clear whatever Grenz means above. Here God is

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<sup>8</sup> Different writers define these terms differently. Warfield “‘foreordain’ and ‘predestination’ are exact synonyms, the choice between which can be determined only by taste” (See Erickson, 908n).

sovereign *de jure* but not *de facto*. *De jure* sovereignty is what is predicated of God “by right” or “by law” (142). That is, it expresses God’s right to rule and God as legitimate owner and possessor of the universe but it does not express God’s actual rule. *De facto* refers to God’s actual rule in the universe. Grenz goes on to deny God’s *de facto* sovereignty: “Applied to God, we may say that at every moment God is completely sovereign *de jure* but not necessarily *de facto*” (142).

If Grenz is right, we have an easy solution to the problem of evil but not to whether God loves humanity or not. Denial of actual sovereignty may keep God’s hands clean; but clean hands do not always equal a loving God. A person who refrains from providing aid to an accident victim to avoid the hassle of giving testimony in court will not be accused of caring. But there are further problems with Grenz’s argument. First, Grenz puts the distinction in the wrong place and confuses the moral will of God and sovereign will of God. Grenz is right when he points out that evil in the world is humanity’s rebellion against God. However, this violates God’s moral will not his sovereign will. The Bible clearly teaches that God’s sovereign will is both *de jure* and *de facto* in the universe. Judas’ betrayal of Jesus and the Jewish leaders’ crucifixion of Christ in cooperation with the Romans were contrary to the moral will but not the sovereign will of God. All evil human acts are in accordance with the sovereign will of God while being a violation of his moral will. That is, they are as God’s sovereign will requires but not because God’s sovereign will requires it. This corresponds to John Calvin’s distinction between proximate and ultimate causes. As Lewis and Demarest write of Calvin, “Whereas God’s sovereign will is the remote cause of the Fall, Adam’s unbelief and rebellion is the immediate cause” (297). That God’s moral will is not *de facto* is acknowledged by the Lord’s prayer: “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Hence, if God’s actual sovereignty violates his love, it must be demonstrated in what manner it does and not by a *carte blanche a priori* denial of sovereignty.

Yet, we agree with Grenz in that our question does not have bearing on God’s sovereignly choosing to create the world that now exists. Since the matter at hand is a debate within Christian theism, the question requires further clarification: if all the parties to the

debate are in agreement on certain aspects of sovereignty, debate on the agreeable aspects would be inconsequential. For example, it follows from the assumption that God is personal and capable of doing whatever is logically possible<sup>9</sup> that God is a self-determined being. Being self-determined implies God's right to create a world of his choosing at a time of his choosing.<sup>10</sup> Yet this choice is dependent on God's nature. Consequently, the resultant world accords with the nature of God as all-wise, all-good and all-powerful and one who would settle for no less than a world that would manifest his glory.<sup>11</sup> We make cars of all sizes, shapes and color. Since these are not morally relevant criteria, there is nothing to begrudge with respect to our choosing one or the other. Likewise, God may choose to make any world only by the standards he sets himself. Since theism asserts that God is the standard, the world must accord with what theists believe God is in himself.<sup>12</sup> Hence, when the entertainment of a certain hypothesis appears to conflict with what we all agree that God is, the unwanted consequences of the hypothesis would discredit it. God's sovereignty in creation or his appointment of the time of the world's end, there is no disagreement, and the hypotheses discussed here do not conflict with these matters.

There are views in which the restriction on sovereignty is merely descriptive. Such views may adequately account for God's omnipotence and omniscience. The dispute between Calvinists and deists is over whether God has chosen to be involved in the world or not. It is not about which is morally right but is merely descriptive. Calvinists and deists do not dispute that God should create a world in which God determines and efficiently controls the laws of nature. God

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<sup>9</sup> One is immediately plunged into a dilemma if one opts for a finite God. If God is finite, there is no guarantee that God's promises to restore our hope will be realized. Thus, while one saves freedom one loses hope. If God is omnipotent then there is no ground to consider that his sovereign rule does not extend to everything in his domain.

<sup>10</sup> William Lane Craig has argued that since the universe has a beginning, and whatever has a beginning must have a cause the cause of the universe must be personal. Since if the cause is not personal then the universe would have to be coextensive with its cause in time (197-198).

<sup>11</sup> The glory of God is "the whole majesty of the divine perfections—infinite wisdom, infinite power, infinite goodness, infinite love" (Machen, 51).

<sup>12</sup> This may also be a matter of how one applies the category of God's omnipotence and dominion over the world. For some, hard determinists God's dominion means that God has not abdicated his plan for the universe to the whims of humanity. For others, libertarians, meaningful freedom requires that God take risks. For still others, compatibilists, meaningful freedom is not necessarily devoid of God's sovereign control.

has no obligation to restrict his involvement in the universe to the satisfaction of one or the other. Deism, however, does not prescribe God's actions but claim to describe it.<sup>13</sup> In this sense, it does not dispute God's sovereign right to interfere; it holds only that God does not interfere in the world by his own sovereign choice. A deist does not put a moral sanction on God's involvement in the universe by claiming that God cannot interfere. Such a moral sanction would require that there exist something in God's nature or in the nature of freedom that rules out God's interference. The deist then is not claiming that God should make a world that operates on its own and one with which he does not interfere. Rather the deist is claiming that God has voluntarily made a world that operates on its own; hence, she denies all claims to divine intervention in the universe. Since the deists' thesis is descriptive rather than normative—it does not claim that God should not interfere with the universe but that God does not interfere with the machine he has created—it is not inconsistent with God's sovereignty. For God voluntarily refrains from interfering with his creation.

If God's noninterference is not voluntary then God is not omnipotent.<sup>14</sup> That is, if there is in the world something, perhaps a power of some kind, that restricts the power of God despite God's efforts or desire to achieve his purpose, then God is not omnipotent. Calvinists in general hold that nothing or no one can thwart or frustrate the will of God. This is the essence of omnipotence. Unlike the Calvinists, the deist holds that this noninterference is absolute and voluntary. Thus, deism poses no threat to the omnipotence of God.

Neither does the deist threaten the traditional understanding of omniscience. The deist can hold that while God has left the world to operate on its own he knows all that has gone on, is going on and will go on in the world. This qualifies God as judge of the universe.

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<sup>13</sup> Of course, one could prescribe with respect to God's behavior. One could say that God ought not to interfere in the universe. However, such would conflict with the theistic belief that God is the standard of the good—whatever God does is good. To subject God to human rules is to deny the deity. Arthur Pink argues that to say that God is sovereign is to say that God is God (Pink, 19). This, nevertheless, does not render language about God's goodness equivocal. It still retains that the word "good" can be used of both God and humans in a univocal sense (See Carnell *Apologetics*, 312-14).

<sup>14</sup> I do not assume here that all involuntary restraints are threats to omnipotence. I do assume that whatever power can accomplish God should be able to accomplish and where God is restrained with respect to these omnipotence is compromised. However, those that involve absurdities (making square circles) or that imply weakness (sin), that God cannot do them is no compromise of omnipotence.

Moreover, since all knowledge requires necessity, that John will choose A instead of B is unavoidable. Yet John can be free in deism because the knowledge of what John will do is independent of the causal factors that lead John to choose A. That is, if I know the sun will rise tomorrow, my knowledge does not cause the sun to rise.<sup>15</sup> The difference between deists and Calvinists is that Calvinists hold that this voluntary noninterference is not absolute whereas deists hold that it is. By itself, this does not make our question intriguing. For if all that Calvinists mean is that sometimes God does not interfere with the operations of nature, it could mean that when nature is moving in accordance with what God wants then he ceases to change it. For example, a person would not open her prized watch if the watch were working properly. There is no need for adjustment. However, if the watch were not working according to the designs of the manufacturer (as theists believe) then the watch would need an adjustment. Thus, aspects or a use of God's sovereignty that is merely descriptive, while not beyond dispute, do not have the same implications for the nature of God as those of freewill theism, which is normative. Yet it is difficult to see how one who loves a watch can follow a policy of noninterference when the watch stops working properly. So part of our discussion will have bearing on the position of deists because it is not clear how the Deists God can be a loving God.

Our question is fully applicable where there are aspects of sovereignty that seem to violate certain theologically accepted truths that have bearing on the nature of God and his relation to his human creatures.<sup>16</sup> These are the areas of sovereignty that are in dispute. On the one hand, the love of God must be preserved; while on the other, the sovereignty and omniscience of God must be preserved. The system of theology that can coherently preserve both the sovereignty of God and the love of God, with respect to God's sovereignty in

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<sup>15</sup> Louis J. Pojman has argued that until the causal relation between one's knowledge of another's action can be established, knowing what another person will do cannot be said to deny the other's freedom (109).

<sup>16</sup> Grenz lists 4 objections to the doctrine of God's sovereignty: (1) partiality, (2) fatalism, (3) the problem of perseverance the Bible repeated call to the believer to be faithful, and (4) the problems that flow from irresistible grace such as (a) since God is not willing for any to perish and his grace is irresistible how can God deny this to multitudes of humans? (b) the Bible teaches that grace is available to those who perish and the invitation is to all who would come; (c) if "ought" implies "can" then irresistible grace is incoherent (586-587). We will deal with these objections in the course of our argument.

salvation in particular and God’s involvement in the “free” actions of his human subjects in general, while maintaining faithfulness to Biblical data is to be preferred.

If, as freewill theists hold, actions are free only when God neither controls nor knows the decisions humans make, then God’s sovereignty is by definition incompatible with human freedom. This morally proscribes God’s involvement in the contingent acts of his free creatures and, as a consequence, claims to give humans a substantive freedom. It puts God’s sovereignty on the level of such claims as “God cannot repent” and “God cannot sin.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, unlike deism this is not merely a descriptive thesis but also a normative thesis; that is, God cannot interfere in human decisions whether God desires to or not. To be truly free according to freewill theists human beings must be free in a libertarian sense of freedom—that is, John must be able to choose either A or B with equal capacity. God may intervene in his universe and act to bring about his purposes, but he cannot contravene human decisions.

It is a requirement of the present dispute that the open theist demonstrate that God cannot interfere by showing that such interference is ruled out by the nature of God or by showing that there is an absurdity involved. The former is achieved when Christians argue that God cannot sin since God is omnipotent and sin is a weakness; or that God is perfect and cannot desire to sin, hence, his power is not in play because he does not will sin. The latter is in view when Christians argue that God’s inability to make a square circle has no bearing on his omnipotence: omnipotence means God can do all that power can do, but absurdities are not within the capacity of power. God cannot make two plus two equal five because such requires stupidity not power—a mathematically challenged child can do that. Freewill theists have attempted to show that God’s involvement in free human decisions is ruled out both by his nature as a loving God and by the absurdity involved in the claim that both God is sovereign and humanity is free. Their challenge to the traditional

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<sup>17</sup> The very nature of God as omniscient and holy rules out repentance and sinning such that any descriptions of God along such lines are said to be anthropomorphic. In this manner, open theists have championed love as the central attribute of God and striven to show that God’s sovereignty in the traditional sense is incompatible with God’s love.

meanings of omniscience and omnipotence is designed to highlight this absurdity.

In the preface to *The Openness of God*, the authors give the meaning of God’s openness as follows: “God, in grace, grants humans significant freedom to cooperate with or work against God’s will for their lives, and he enters into dynamic, give-and-take relationships with us” (Pinnock et al, 7). In this dynamic relationship, a “genuine interaction” takes place between God and human beings in which as we respond to God, and “God responds to our responses.” Moreover, our prayers involve a genuine dialogue since the future is not settled (Pinnock et al, 7). They see as a failure of traditional theology the emphasis on “God’s sovereignty, majesty and glory” (Pinnock et al, 11). Consequently, there is a need for “a theology that is biblically faithful and intellectually consistent, and that reinforces, rather than makes problematic, our relational experience with God (Pinnock et al, 7-8). Two general criticisms of this position are relevant presently. First, the debate here concerns God’s sovereign, not God’s moral, will. The openness of God conflates the two and thereby attacks a straw man. Traditional theology holds that God’s sovereign will by which he governs all the actions of his creation—personal and impersonal—is inviolable even while his moral will is being constantly violated. Even the vilest of human evil—the crucifixion of Christ—is said to be subject to the sovereign will of God (Acts 2:23). Thus in defining the debate, the authors set up a straw man.

Second, this position is not biblically faithful. The first chapter, written by Richard Rice, provides the Biblical support for the openness view. In his chapter, Rice challenges Stephen Charnock’s view of God’s immutability. Rice argues, “Nearly all of the Bible’s descriptions of God fall within the broad designation of ‘metaphor’ because they are not literal accounts of divine reality. Yet metaphors are not equidistant from the represented object—God. If so, some metaphors are more important than others. What we need is to give proper emphasis to ones that deserve the emphasis. However, Rice does not provide the criteria for distinguishing more important metaphors from less important ones. He only asserts that love occupies the place of the more important metaphor. He then attempts to show that the metaphor of love is in conflict with the traditional view of sovereignty. But the Bible does not present God as capable of

violating any of his other attributes to satisfy his love. This view misses the centrality of the cross of Christ in satisfying both the love and holiness of God (Rom 3:25-26). Christ dies, making God both just and the justifier. A theology that tramples on this fact cannot be said to be biblically faithful.

A second biblical support Rice gives for the openness of God has to do with God changing his mind. Rice writes that the “best-known example is Jonah’s mission to Nineveh” (27). Rice tells that Jonah reaches the city and proclaims, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned” (Jon. 3:4). The city repented and God had compassion on them and “did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened” (3:10). He gives a few other biblical examples but this one seem pivotal to Rice.

A few points will make clear what is wrong with the openness’ view of Jonah. First, the context of the book of Jonah is crucial in understanding what transpired. The goal of the book is to question the attitude of Israel, who was to be God’s representative on the earth. They were not concerned with the souls of all people. They were hoping to use God to destroy their enemies. The book ends with God asking Jonah: “Should I not be concerned about that great city?” (Jon 4:11). It is difficult—given the context and the fact that Jonah refused to go to Nineveh to preach knowing that God would have compassion if the Ninevites repented—to hold that the message did not include a provision of repentance. This is why Jonah fled. He probably thought that the forty days would be over by the time God got him back. In addition, the sailors tried to save his life by bringing him back, but Jonah happily offered to be thrown into the sea—suicide by proxy. He preferred death to preaching to Nineveh knowing God’s provision. The fact that the book presents Jonah as knowing and resenting God’s provision of mercy to Nineveh implies that Jonah did not preach the whole message to Nineveh. Consequently, this partial message cannot be presented as one God was obligated to. Second, there was a standing prophetic understanding, though articulated later than Jonah, that if God proclaims judgment against a nation or people and they repent he will forgive, but if they do not repent, the threatened evil will be brought against them (Jer. 18:7-11). Despite the fact that this articulation is later than Jonah’s day, it is clear from the Book that he was aware of it. James Bruckner, commenting on the book of Jonah,

writes, “God’s compassion hidden inside his absolute judgment and Jonah’s protest against it are the fulcrum of the book (4:2b). Jonah knows that God’s judgment always implies the possibility of mercy, even when the language of judgment sounds absolute” (Bruckner. 95). Context is crucial to biblical faithfulness.<sup>18</sup> Rice is aware of this text but he uses it to argue that God changes his mind (31-2). However, it is clear from the text that the holy God is constant in his love of good and in his enmity against evil and that what is changing is humanity in relation to evil. For example, the law does not change because one decides to obey it or disobey it. Returning to our contention, nowhere does Rice define love. Love in the Bible is God willing good to one or other of his creatures within the boundaries of “the day of grace” (Carnell, *Philosophy*, 352). There is no absurdity involved in such love. Rice points out that the cross is the supreme display of God’s love and that love is the closest “definition of the divine reality” but never tells us what love itself is or involves (18-21).

Freewill theists also claim that divine sovereignty is inconsistent with human freedom. God’s sovereignty requires necessity which, the freewill theist holds, rules out human freedom, since God cannot know what is false. Thus, if God is sovereign over human choices then those choices are not free. Since omniscience and omnipotence presuppose such sovereignty, it follows that God is neither omniscient nor omnipotent in the traditional sense. We pointed out above in connection with restricting the power of God that if God’s noninterference is not voluntary, then God is not omnipotent. If God’s will can be thwarted, he is not all-powerful. The same does not apply to what God cannot in his wisdom and goodness will—absurdities or sin. However, here it becomes evident that open theists, who hold that God’s noninterference in human affairs is not voluntary, are not asserting God’s lack of power to interfere but are asserting some moral or theological restraint placed upon God by his own choice to make free creatures. At this point, it is up to such a one to provide the condition in God’s nature that rules out such interference. Whatever theological system she proposes must not only be internally coherent

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<sup>18</sup> “The book is, in many ways, a microcosm of God’s relationship to his whole creation in history. It provides an occasion for discussion of what no one really wants to talk about: God’s role in the persistence of evil in the world. Jonah is engaged in an honest protest (his running away from Nineveh) and discussion (in ch. 4) with God about the violent Ninevites” (Bruckner, 17-18).

(because such alone would support the possibility of truth), it must also be consistent with the Scripture. Suppose someone said that if God loves humanity, God will not keep a tight grip on human actions. In this sense, it is voluntary—aspects of his own nature restrain God. God would help (or like to help) if he had not morally constrained himself. This appears coherent because both sides hold that God must act in accordance with his nature. However, it is not clear that one is morally superior who does not give help where it is needed because if one helps A one must also help B and that it is coherent to think of God as wanting that which is contrary to God's nature.<sup>19</sup> That God has chosen to rule in human affairs is not in question here. The Biblical revelation is unequivocal on that point. The question then becomes whether a sovereign choice to rule in human affairs is less loving than a sovereign choice not to.

The serious implications this has for reformation faith necessitate that it be shown that the accusation of inconsistency does not hold. The Biblical authors affirm God's omniscience and omnipotence and human freedom. They do not appear to be aware of an absurdity in affirming God's sovereignty and human freedom. If open theists are right, it appears that the Bible harbors an absurdity in its essential propositions. Moreover, God would not be sovereign over his creation since there would be a part of God's creation that is outside of his control and reducible to chance.<sup>20</sup> If God is limited to his own goals and actions, if God can only predict what he will do but cannot presume upon what any human person will do, how does he guarantee

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<sup>19</sup> One who can help should help where there is moral obligation. Grace rules in situations where one has no moral obligation. Thus, that God chooses Israel rather than another nation as the bearer of his Son is not morally relevant. God must work through some or leave himself without a testimony.

<sup>20</sup> Not only does God refraining from controlling the acts of free persons threaten his love for humanity but as J. Gresham Machen has argued that this denies God's omniscience and introduces chance—"a wild, unaccountable factor"—into God's universe (1937, 36-38). Machen argues that the logical outcome of this view are that there is a part of the universe that is not subject to God's dominion and that God ceases to be God because he has to wait to see what his creatures will do and then react, thus God is not the creator but the servant of time with the rest of his plan depending upon his creatures. Does God voluntarily not know the free actions of his creatures? Others of this persuasion hold that God does not foreordain but he does foreknow the free actions of his creatures. In this view, God restraint is voluntary but God's knowledge is not. This view fails to acknowledge the inevitable relation between certainty and knowledge. Since knowing involves certainty, it is hard to see how this view can extricate God from the responsibility for the actions of his creatures. The view while it appears palatable does not answer the real question it is intended to solve. If God knows beforehand the actions of his creatures, he knew that they would sin after they were created. If God knew beforehand that they would sin after they were created then by creating them God determined their actions (See Machen 1937, 37-41).

the bringing of his Son into the world at “the fullness of time,” that his Son be killed on a cross, betrayed and so on. It appears that actions that involve human cooperation cannot be guaranteed. Within God’s sovereign control is not only impersonal nature but also the free choices of human beings; Calvinists hold this not primarily on philosophical grounds but on Biblical grounds.

If it is possible that both God’s sovereignty and human freedom are compatible, the charge fails. Freewill theists are right when they argue that if God is omniscient, the future is determined. For how can God know the future, if the future is not determined? However, if the future is determined, is it necessary that it be determined in a manner that denies substantial human freedom? It is here that Calvinists and open theists part company. As argued above, it is possible that one know the future and the future not be caused by the knowledge. The open theists must show this causal link between one’s knowledge of how a friend will act in a given situation and how the friend does in fact act. This has been assumed but not demonstrated. Reformed theology, on the other hand, has demonstrated that consonant with ordinary life, God’s sovereign control over his human creatures is not exercised in the same manner as over his non-human creatures. Yet, it holds that God is sovereign in both instances in that his plans are not frustrated. As in ordinary circumstances, knowing a friend’s desires one may provide a compelling and persuasive argument that the friend pursue a certain course. Nevertheless, no one would say that the friend’s freedom has been violated even though the friend finds the argument irresistible. The friend is acting in accordance with his own nature and desires. If such compulsion is consistent with freedom, why is it necessary that we hold that God’s sovereign rule over his human subjects violate their freedom? (I will say more about this compatibility, its relation to one’s desire and nature, and the conception of freedom that rejects it below.)

Given the negative criticisms of open theism and the clarification of the debate so far, I will not only argue that a sovereign God does not love humanity less than a God limited by human freedom, I will also argue that the Biblical picture of the God of love is that only a sovereign God can love humanity. The argument of this article is not

primarily a Biblical or theological argument<sup>21</sup> but a philosophical argument (see the following articles in this series for the theological defense of the position). Yet it takes as its starting point God's self-disclosure given in the Bible. For any Christian and any Christian philosopher this is the authoritative word of truth and the starting point.

### **B. The Biblical Picture of a Loving God**

Open theists have asserted that a sovereign God is not the loving God of the Bible but rather a mean despot. A God limited by human freedom is one who, like the deist's watchmaker, does not interfere with the decisions of humanity. Despite their claim that this restricted noninterference is voluntary since God freely chose to create free creatures, it is ultimately not voluntary because it is defended on grounds that God cannot interfere, rather than that God does not interfere.<sup>22</sup>

Let's begin setting the stage for evaluating whether a sovereign God loves humanity less than one limited by human freedom by considering that in dealing with Christianity we are dealing with a system of beliefs that coheres logically and experientially. Christianity is a system of beliefs whose foundation is the Bible. The Christian holds that the Bible is revealed truth and that its account of humanity and the world presents a most comprehensive and adequate picture. Therefore, the facts with which the Christian argues are given in the Bible. There are some propositions that are foundational to Christianity and others that are derived from those that are foundational by reliable logical steps. In evaluating a system, it is crucial to distinguish the defining propositions (axioms) of the system from those that are on the periphery of the system and those that are logically derived from the defining propositions. The defining propositions are those that one cannot deny without rejecting the

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<sup>21</sup> For a more detailed contemporary discussion of the theological and biblical arguments from a historical perspective see R. K. M'Gregor Wright's *No Place for Sovereignty: What's Wrong with Freewill Theism*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996). Also, earlier articles in this series.... This article rests on the presentation of the sovereignty of God given in the previous articles.

<sup>22</sup> Those who hold God limited by human freedom to be voluntary will also hold to the defining tenets of theism—God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omni-benevolent. It is difficult to see how they can hold to the Biblical revelation. At this point, Thomas Jefferson's idea of a mutilated Bible was more consistent. However, those who hold God's limitation of himself to be involuntary may deny one of the defining tenets of theism. In this case, the contemporary fad is to deny omniscience to God.

system as a whole. The propositions on the periphery are those that can be denied without rejecting the system. The propositions, on the other hand, that follow logically from the defining propositions can also make or break the system. Calvinism claims to be a system not only entailed by the basic propositions of Christian theism but also explicitly articulated in the propositions of God's own revelation. Consequently, since God not only revealed the basic propositions but also shows certain entailments, any affirmation that contradicts these will also be in tension with the basic propositions of Christian theism.<sup>23</sup> The theologian is concerned with the expression of these axioms and, to a lesser extent, concerned with logically inferring other beliefs from the basic propositions. The Bible lays down some defining propositions concerning God and some defining propositions concerning God's relation to his creation. In responding to our question, the triune, omnipotent, omniscient God's relation to his creation interests us. This does not mean that the defining propositions concerning God are irrelevant. They are not. Rather we are presupposing them. For example, that God's decrees are from eternity,<sup>24</sup> that God created time, that his eternal purposes unfold in time but are not made in time are all necessary for God's omnipotence but presupposed in this discussion. We must also begin by assuming that the human will is not free from the total human person.<sup>25</sup> In

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<sup>23</sup> One of the strengths of McGregor's work is the emphasis he places on logical relation between the defining tenets of theism and the points of Calvinism. For example, he points out that in the historical development of Arminianism came to realize that their definition of free will as being outside of God's eternal decrees implied limits not only to God's omnipotence but also his omniscience, because "if a future event is known to God, it is either known certainly or not. But to know certainly that an event will happen means that it could not happen otherwise. In other words, God's omniscience eliminates a free will in the sense the Arminians understood it" (Wright 1996, 32). The Calvinist use of 'free will' sees the will as a function of willing that follows from the character—whether the character be good or bad (Wright 1996, 45).

<sup>24</sup> Both Calvinists and Arminians hold that God planned the world in eternity. However, they give different interpretations of the decrees. For example, for the Arminian the elect does not denote individuals who are chosen by God for salvation, as Calvinists hold, but God's decree that the class of people who repent will be saved. Among Calvinists there are three different logical orders of the decrees—supralapsarianism, infralapsarian, and sublapsarian (Erickson, 918). The supralapsarian order reject a permissive will. The infralapsarian and sublapsarian orders reject the doctrine of reprobation but differ on their understanding of limited atonement. Lewis and Demarest seem to not differentiate between the infralapsarian and sublapsarian orders (1:320).

<sup>25</sup> A contrary presupposition frees the will from the rest of the person. A will that is free from the rest of the person is also free from the effects of sin. Such a will is not governed by the intellect so that the noetic effects of sin will have no impact on the will. Thus, a person by himself can will the will of God. This position will be dealt with below.

addition, when I refer to a sovereign God it does not mean that God's will is independent of God's nature. Rather it involves God's bringing to pass what is in accordance with his wisdom and love and justice.

Since we are concerned with a system and those, who accept certain theological statements must accept claims that logically follow from those statements. It follows from God's infinite purity and love<sup>26</sup> and humanity's inevitable sinfulness that there is enmity between God and humanity. The essence of Christianity is the cessation of the enmity that exists between God and humanity. This cessation of enmity between God and humanity is presented in the Bible as the apex of the manifestation of God's glory. If, as the Bible presents it, God's glory is the totality of God's being, and love is essential to that totality, then in every act of God love is present. The question becomes how that is brought about. Does it come about by the human will or God's? By 'God's will,' I do not mean that God merely sets the conditions on which he will accept humans but that God also actively provides the fulfillment of that condition in some humans. We will begin with a commonly shared belief: original sin. I do not claim that the concept of original sin is not debatable in Christianity. Debates about the truth of original sin are usually undertaken between Christians and humanists who believe that humans are by nature good. This position makes excellent sense if human behavior is not a relevant criterion of judgment. Both Calvinists and Arminians hold that Adam's sin has affected the human race as a whole. The debate within Christianity does not center on original sin's reality but on its extent and effect. For while Arminians hold to the doctrine of original sin they soften its effect by an appeal to a doctrine of prevenient grace.

The Bible teaches not only that all humans are sinners but also that every person who has grown to maturity has chosen sin and that the bent of human nature is away from God. This latter is the effect of the sin of Adam on the race. Because of Adam's sin, his posterity became sinful by nature—such that humans have a propensity to sin, not to righteousness. This Biblical account is borne out in human experience. Jonathan Edwards argues in an essay entitled "The Great

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<sup>26</sup> Since God cannot act outside of either his holiness or his love, both love and holiness must characterize every act of God. The Apostle Paul describes the death of Christ as being on behalf of both God's love and his holiness (Rom. 3:23-26).

Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended,” that if, as the Bible teaches, all human beings are sinners and deserve just punishment for sin, then there must be a propensity to sin in humankind. To demonstrate that the tendency to sin exists, requires that the constancy, infallibility and universality of human sin be its consequence. The universality and infallibility is not affected by the fact that sometimes there seems to be more good than evil, because the question is not whether there is much sin but whether there is a “prevailing propensity” to sin. For example, one cannot deny the prevalence of germs in the world because of antibodies. In fact, the existence of antibodies presupposes the germs. Thus, for Edwards, the fact that reason hinders the full run of sin is not evidence that there is no prevailing tendency to sin (149).<sup>27</sup> Constancy belongs to the very notion of tendency. Since the tendency is the cause or occasion which is followed by a particular kind of effect, it follows that “where we see a stated prevalence of any effect there is a tendency to that effect in the nature and state of its causes” (150).

Thus, the prevalence of effect equals the prevalence of cause. Edwards illustrates this with the throwing of a die. We do not argue from a die that is thrown once and falls on a particular side that the die is weighted. However, we do argue from a die that is thrown many thousands or millions of times and constantly lands on the same side that there is a propensity in the die caused by the “superior weight of that side, or in some other respect” (150). Given the great diversity of persons and circumstances and the fact that there is no failing to sin is evidence equal to that of the die. This tendency to sin cannot be in our circumstances because our circumstances vary. Opponents of the doctrine cannot deny such a tendency in humans. If they deny it, they must admit that there is some situation in which some person or persons do not sin. However, if they then admit the grace of God in Christ then the problem of fairness, which they intend to rid themselves of raises its head again. For in this instance it will be improper for God to forgive the bad ones when some are good on their own (153). Given Edwards argument it seems that prevent

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<sup>27</sup> Golding fictional attempt in *Lord of the Flies* illustrates that human depravity is restrained by civilization, philosophy and religion. That depravity has not run its full course is no argument for the goodness of human nature. For Golding what is necessary for the descent into savagery is the removal of the three barriers.

grace is not very successful against original sin. The possibility of such is not farfetched and given the actual biblical data it is difficult to see how the appeal to prevenient grace can be sustained. Romans 1 paints a picture of the gradual theological decline of the Gentile world into irretrievable lostness.

The only hope of restoration was the activity of God in and through Israel, His Son and apostles (Rom. 1:4, 16-17; 10:14-18). The very same threat from original sin to the suppression of the knowledge of God existed among the chosen people that only God's activity could hinder: Isaiah writes, "unless the Lord has left us a remnant we would have been like Sodom and Gomorrah." Given this, we are immediately plunged into a dilemma whose only assailable premise is the conjunctive one, for the disjunctive premise is exhaustive given Arminian premises, hence, unassailable. If human freedom is outside of God's power, the loss of the true knowledge of God will result. If God intervenes then meaningful freedom is lost. It is this latter statement that is at issue.

The Bible illustrates this corrupted state as being dead, blind and other such metaphors that describe the total inability of each person to extricate herself from such depravity. Such description would not be true were prevenient grace operational. From this, two points are relevant to our question. Leaving out the passing on of a sinful human nature from Adam to his posterity for the moment, if the human condition is that each person is left to sin or not sin by a God limited by human freedom,<sup>28</sup> an absolutely holy God limited in such a manner would find humanity abhorrent and punish those who sin. Such a God would conclude that if all sin, then all would be lost; if some sin, then that is all right but will leave it up to is human creatures. Since this God has limited himself, he cannot stop all, most or some from sinning and he cannot provide redemption for those who do. The solemn possibility exists that early in human history the knowledge of

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<sup>28</sup> I describe this as either voluntary or involuntary because there are those who not only hold that God restrains himself when it comes to human actions but also that God does not even know beforehand the choices of his free creatures. It is also arguable that if God's limiting of himself is a requirement of the concept of freedom then it is on the level of the Biblical claim that God cannot lie. But it is not that God could lie if he wanted to. The nature of God excludes it such that lying is not an option with God because God cannot even will the lie; hence, not voluntary. For God to be limited by human freedom in such a fashion one must show what in God's nature excludes such an exercise of his sovereignty if God could exercise it without taking away freedom.

God would have been lost never to be recovered by humanity. This divine indifference is contrary to the picture of the Biblical God. The open God cannot provide redemption because it would not be fair for him to insist on a system of merit and violate the system by providing a system of mercy to some.<sup>29</sup> In such a world, it is possible that some people might not sin at all and others might sin. For a God limited by human freedom to save in such a world those who do sin would be inconsistent on God's part.

However, it is indifference and apathy of such a God that is more indicting than inconsistency. The contrary picture is one of love not apathy. A sovereign God will allow human evil in his world but will control and battle that evil. The sovereign God will permit<sup>30</sup> that evil to enter through the federal head of human race and in this manner corrupting human nature so that not only does each person possess a propensity to sin and through this God can someday himself bear the sins of humanity. This is the Biblical picture (Rom. 5:11-20).<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> It may be objected that those who hold this view do not hold that there is a violation of noninterference in God's work of bringing His Son into the world through Abraham and Israel because this does not violate human freedom. It is difficult to see how this obeys the principle of noninterference when God guarantees an outcome that involves humans before consulting them. If God guarantees an outcome then the outcome is certain. If certain, then in some way the human will is not independent of divine influence.

<sup>30</sup> This may depend on the understanding of permission. If by permission one means that God allows the world to run wherever it will, Calvinism denies it. Whereas if by permission one means that God actively determines which acts of sin to restrain and which to allow in accordance with maximizing his glory, Calvinism does not deny such. This paper defends an infralapsarian position in which God does not directly will reprobation for in that case God will be the author of sin. That is, God's election of individuals to be saved is unconditional but his willing of individuals to be lost is conditional. God seeing that humans will sin determines which sins he will allow to be instantiated in the universe but he does not will the sin.

<sup>31</sup> That God does allow/ordain sinful acts in his world does not make him the author of sin. However, here again only a sovereign God can love humanity. If life will be bearable in this sinful world, people cannot be allowed to be as bad as they possibly can. Will Durant points out in his evaluation of Voltaire's *Candide* that Voltaire demagogue the issue of evil in the world. The world is not as evil as he paints it. People are not rushing to return their ticket. A sovereign God will be in the business of restraining evil. A God limited by human freedom will allow human evil to run rampant without divine interference. The Psalmist writes of the sovereign God, "Surely the wrath of man shall praise you: and the remainder of wrath thou shalt restrain" (Psa. 76:10). This cannot be said of a non-interfering but of a sovereign God. Even atheists have problems with a God who does not interfere against evil. For some it says that God cannot be all good. B.C. Johnson argues that God cannot be all-good because God does not do anything to restrain evil. Even if God is not all-powerful, being God he is powerful enough to stop some evil, Johnson argues. We are not asking God to change the world or get rid of all evil but we are asking only that God cures polio, prevent two year olds from dying in fires and give heart attack in infancy to would be Hitlers. But, of course, Johnson's assumption is that God is doing none of this. The weakness of Johnson's argument is evident, how sure is he that the two year olds that die in fires and get polios is not God's way of getting rid of would be Hitlers. Johnson wants to have his cake and eat it too. The point here is that even atheists recognize that a God who is sovereign does not love humanity less. [Footnote continued on next page ... ]

The second relevant point is that if the picture of humanity is accurately described by the state of being dead or blind then humanity cannot extricate itself from the clutches of sin. A God limited by human freedom will have to say, “You had your choice.” But let’s suppose this God is also loving. If so, then he will provide some means of redemption for such people to avail themselves of those means.<sup>32</sup> That is, to use the illustration of blindness, he will turn the lights on around them and hope they see. But the Christian God is also wise which means that God does not choose means that are not appropriate to the ends he desires. Since God is both wise and loving, he would choose means appropriate to the end of bequeathing good to his creatures. One who adopts means that are not appropriate to the end to be attained when he knows those means are not appropriate is neither wise nor loving. A sovereign God would turn the light on in each of them. That is, a sovereign God would choose the means that is appropriate to the ends to be achieved. Given that the other attributes of God are accepted—all-wise, omnipotent, etc.—it follows that only a sovereign God can in this situation be loving. This curing of the blindness or turning on of the light within must be unconditional because every human being is in the same state of blindness. This is what Reformed theology calls unconditional election. Reformed theology does not mean by unconditional election that God has no reasons for his choice rather it means that God owes this opening of the eyes to no human efforts.<sup>33</sup>

The objection arises that if God cures the blindness why does God cure only some of their blindness and not all. Given the real threat from sin, the answer is to maintain in the world a witness for himself. This should not be taken to mean that God chooses for service and not for salvation. This is not an either service or salvation

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Yes, God will allow some of the evil of his free creatures but will not allow the complete run of evil in his world. This is true of antibodies as it is of moral evil (Acts 2:23; 4:27; 2 Sam. 16:7-10). Hence, they are evil but not outside of God’s eternal plan.

<sup>32</sup> If the means of redemption is required by the holiness of God as given in the Bible, that is, if God must come and die on a cross for the liberation of humanity, God has to guarantee that he gets it in accordance with his plan. But if that involves humans it is difficult to see how the human will can be independent of God. A God whose plan is in flux is not the God of the Bible.

<sup>33</sup> Someone could object that some do believe and some do not so that God is not indifferent because he leaves it up to humans. But that is to side step the question. The question is not to describe the existing state of affairs but the appropriate cause of that state of affairs. The existing state of affairs only tells us what is and not how it came to about. For this reason, a revelation from God is indispensable.

but a both service and salvation. As God said to Abraham, “I will bless you...so that you will be a blessing.” Abraham cannot pass on what he does not possess and he cannot possess what God has not given. Nevertheless, that God desires to preserve a witness in the world is not a sufficient response because the import of this objection differs slightly from the question we have been considering. Our question is one of love, that is, whether God wills some good to humanity. The import of this question is one of justice and fairness. How can God be fair and just? Is not such a God less loving? There is a basic misunderstanding in this objection. When love is the issue, the question is not one of fairness. For love dispenses with what is its right for the good of another. It requires that the one owed absorb the cost freely. Love concerns what is freely given; whereas, justice and fairness concern the meeting of an obligation—that one repay what is owed to another. As a question of justice, the God who takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked must exercise his office as judge and punish the guilty. In love, God freely dispenses what is his to whomever he wished. God is not bound to give the same gift to all. In the parable of the hired servants the Lord Jesus makes exactly this point when the landowner asserted his right to do with what was his exactly what he wanted. If God has the right of disposition over what is his<sup>34</sup> then God is not being unfair he is, as the landlord puts it, being generous.

### **C. Question of God’s Fairness**

Maybe the question is not whether God is unfair in dispensing with what is his but is whether he is fair in punishing people who were not chosen or who could not come to him. Worded this way the question has two parts: (1) since human nature prevents people from believing, how can God punish people who were not free to choose? (2) Since there are people who actually want to believe who are rejected from the outset, how can God be fair when he is taking those who do not want to believe by force? The first part of this question is based on a different concept of freedom—libertarian freedom.<sup>35</sup> It

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<sup>34</sup> Rom 9:15ff.

<sup>35</sup> Wright has argued that the presuppositions brought to bear on the discussion influence the discussion in the direction of Pelagianism. Wright contends that the definition of free will differs in the [Footnote continued on next page ... ]

assumes that to be free is to be free from who one is, that is, the will is independent of the total person—the character, nature and desires of the person. In the Bible, it is not the absence of freedom to act according to one’s nature.<sup>36</sup> In fact, the devil uses a person’s lusts to tempt her. Evil consists in this lust.<sup>37</sup> God himself is said to be the most free yet the Bible tells us that there are things God cannot do, like sin. Such things are contrary to God’s nature and do not hinder God’s freedom.

Human beings in acting in accordance with their nature are acting freely. While such beings may be acting in accordance with God’s sovereign will, they are not acting because God’s sovereign will desires them to act as such. They are acting from their desires even though their desires accord with the eternal plan of God. Hence, God is just in punishing them. An incident in the book of Habakkuk illustrates this. God tells the prophet that he will use the Babylonians to punish the Israelites for their sins. He is also told by God that the instrument of judgment, the Babylonians, are ruthless, impetuous and a bunch of usurpers and that in time God will punish them for what they will do to Israel because God says of Babylon, “his desires are not right” (Hab. 2:4). While Babylon was acting in accordance with God’s desires they were not acting because it was what God wanted but acting for their own ends. To paraphrase Kant, their actions have

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disputing camps and this difference leads to the deviation of one camp from Biblical Christianity. Therefore, the way back is to clarify the terms involved (Wright 1996, 12-13).

<sup>36</sup> For Edwards, the will and desire are not contrary to each other. Rather, “a man never, in any instance, wills anything contrary to his desires, or desires anything contrary to his Will (5). He argues that to show that the will and desire may be opposed to each other it must be demonstrated that they may be contrary to each other “in the same thing” (5). To say the will is determined is to say that it is caused. The question then is does the will cause itself or is it caused by something other than the will. The will is determined by the strongest motive (5). Motive, Edwards defines as, the totality of what “moves, excites, or invites the mind to volition (6). This must be an apparent good to the mind because the will tends towards what the mind judges to be good. Thus necessity may describe a state in which the bias is so strong that there is difficulty in going against it (10). Edwards equates this with moral inability in which the strength of a contrary inclination controls the will. But argues that this use of ability is misleading because the issue is one of willing not of being able (14). Two things are contrary to liberty—constraint and restraint. Constraint is when one is forced to something contrary to one’s will; whereas restraint is when one is hindered from doing what one wills (12). Careful and Strict Inquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of that Freedom of Will.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Jonathan Edwards, *On the Freedom of the Will*. Edwards writes, “It is agreeable to the natural notions of mankind, that moral evil, with its desert of dislike and abhorrence, and all its other ill deservings, consists in a certain *deformity* in the *Nature* of certain dispositions of the heart, and acts of the Will; and not in the deformity of *something else*, diverse from the very thing itself, which deserves abhorrence, supposed to be the Cause of it. Which would be absurd, because that would be to suppose a thing that is innocent and not evil, is truly evil and faulty, because another thing is evil (59)

no moral worth in the sight of God; consequently, it deserves divine judgment. This is all that justice requires.

The second part assumes that there are some who actually want to believe in God who are rejected or some who do not want to believe in God who because of predestination are brought kicking and screaming into the kingdom. Neither of these assumptions is true. The former makes light of the doctrine of depravity and think that there are people out there who are sympathetic to the cause of God that God would not allow into his kingdom even if they asked to be let in. The Bible unequivocally says that there are no such people because no person left to himself will come to God and God stands open to receive the penitent.<sup>38</sup> The latter assumes that predestination implies a violation of human freedom. While God governs the impersonal portion of the universe in a manner that implies they have no freedom to be violated that does not mean that humans are governed in the same manner.<sup>39</sup> While it is accurate to describe this as compelling those who are predestined, it is yet true that not all compulsion violates freedom. The fact that we have a nature and that the nature dictates our choices and actions means that one who is capable of affecting our nature is capable of affecting our choices. Our will is dependent on our nature. If it were independent of our nature then there, would be no grounds for choosing and no one would be able to persuade us to one side or another. That it is tied to our nature means that a friend could present an argument, which I will not be able to ignore yet that friend has not violated my freedom of will. My liberty

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<sup>38</sup> Jesus in John 6:44 says, “No one can come to me, unless the father draws him.”

<sup>39</sup> It is an error to confuse freedom with uncertainty. To say that someone is free is not to say that his actions are not certain. Certain free people are predictable by those who know them. That is because those who know them know their character. To equate freedom with uncertainty is to affirm a freedom that excludes faithfulness. No one can rely on a person who is free such that he can break his word at will. If the reliability of a free person is from external compulsion we do not attribute moral worth to the actions of the person. If a business person decides to treat his customers fairly because such treatment is good for business, we consider such person prudent not moral. But when from within one’s own nature one values keeping ones word one is considered a reliable person. Thus, to be free is not to be uncertain of what one would do but to be determined by one’s own character (Machen 1937, 24-26). Philosophers such as Descartes have argued that though the will is controlled by the intellect freedom is not violated (Meditations IV). A similar argument can be made for motives, desires and the like. To be free is to be determined by one’s own character not by something external to one’s character. The Babylonians were determined by their greed which was internal to them. For this reason, their condemnation was just. In Jeremiah God tells the people that the lies of the false prophets was of the people’s making. If the people desired truth the false prophets would have no leg to stand on; however, the people’s desire for falsehood created the false prophets (see Jer. 5:31; 14:16; 29:8-9).

is preserved in such intercourse even though the logic of the argument itself may compel me to believe. In the same way, God, who is responsible for the nature he has given us, may influence our nature through persuasion to bring about his purposes without violating our freedom. A sovereign God is one who makes use of the availability of this avenue both without violating freedom and with certainty, thereby willing some good to humanity. A God limited by human freedom in the Arminian sense cannot interfere in such a manner. This shows that the Arminian conception even if internally coherent is uninformed in that it does not acknowledge that certainty and freedom are not incompatible. They must show compatibilism absurd. This would be particularly difficult given that while ordinary common sense humans consider persuasion coercive they do not consider that it violates freedom.

However, is not the alternative open to God to do this for all? That is, the question still stands that God ought to do this for all instead of for some. As a father has obligation to all of his children, so God has obligation to all of his creation so that the charge of unfairness still has to be dealt with. Some have argued that this alternative is open to God. In technical terms, this is styled as prevenient grace, which holds that God has provided grace to all so that whoever wants to believe may come to believe. This objection holds that if God gives grace to all but some do not respond then he will be fair but if he gives grace to some he will be unfair. But this just says that all humans are in the state of Adam such that if one wants to believe then one may. We have already dealt with this above and concluded that this only leads to an indifferent God not to the God presented in the Bible. Reformed theology have argued, and rightly so, that somehow in his infinite wisdom the sovereign God has not seen fit to pursue this alternative. This alternative is appropriate to a God who is limited by human freedom and indifferent but not to a God who loves humanity. This is what Reformed jargon refers to as limited or particular atonement.

In limited atonement, God guarantees that some will be saved. The death of Christ does not just purchase the availability of salvation, even though it is sufficient for all who would believe, but it

purchases salvation for those individuals predestined<sup>40</sup> to believe in Christ. Christ died for all in the sense that it is indefinite from the human standpoint who Christ purchased—God alone knows those who are his—but not from God’s standpoint. By guaranteeing that some be saved, God is not indifferent but loving. Since non-Calvinists hold that God cannot turn the inner light on for any they must also hold that he cannot turn the light within on for all because that will make us robots. If the question is that of a limited God versus a sovereign God, it seems the limited God is found wanting. Since the God limited by human freedom cannot cure the blindness of any he cannot cure, the blindness of all so on either count some will be lost. That some are lost where God is sovereign is not an argument against sovereignty. The problem is that under the other system there is no guarantee that some will be saved. Thus, the sovereign God is more loving than a God limited is because the sovereign God wills some good to humanity.

But the objection to limited atonement usually takes on a Scriptural guise. The Bible presents God as wanting “all men to be saved.” Moreover, it invites all men to come to Christ. Why would God make an invitation to people who cannot come? Does not “ought” imply “can”? If God commands people to obey the law, they cannot be depraved beyond ability. If God invites people to come, they must be able to come. In response, such reasoning is erroneous. As Lewis and Demarest write, “A universal invitation is valid because it is descriptively true. It reports the fact that trust is essential to a personal relationship with God as well as others. Fellowship with Christ involves faith in him. Reformed theology does not say that God elects sinners to heaven without themselves becoming believers. It states the truism that any who will turn from idols to Christ will be saved” (3:59). Thus, all the invitation gives is the requirement for salvation. This requirement is not limited by the inability to believe. It does not follow from the invitation or the command that one is able to obey it. What follows from it is the conditional that if one obeys the injunction one will reap the benefits of obedience. Hence, the

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<sup>40</sup> See *Basic Christian Doctrines* edited by Carl F.H. Henry, especially the articles on “The Decrees of God” and “Predestination” for a succinct theological discussion.

occasion of the command is not an occasion to import into the Biblical data a prevenient grace.

The further charge that Calvinism diminishes any desire for missions can be responded to with an *ad hominem*. As Arminianism has become more and more consistent in our day, it has shown that a consistent Arminianism would itself lead to the death of missions. On the fate of the unevangelized Sanders and Pinnock seem to hold that people can be saved without any knowledge of Christ and that the only grounds for damnation is conscious rejection of Christ's offer of salvation. It follows from this that there are some saved people who when confronted with the gospel will reject it. But if this is so, such people will be moved from the saved column to the lost when the gospel is preached to them. Thus, the Apostle Paul is equally responsible for sending people to both heaven and hell, since he insists on taking the gospel to those among whom it has not been preached. At a Society for Christian Philosophers meeting two presenters of such position responding to my inquiry along these lines said, we should be careful not to bother those who are faithful in their traditions. The Calvinist has better reasons for missions than the Arminian has. The Calvinist knows that God has a people out there and that God has decreed that they will not hear without a preacher. Consequently, she has an optimistic view of missions. It was Adoniram Judson who responded to the difficulties encountered in Burma: "The future is as bright as the promises of God." The Calvinist does not have to appeal to "anonymous Christians" to populate heaven.

### **Conclusion**

The guarantee of God's will is that some will be saved not only initially through an irresistible grace but also through a preserving grace that our Lord rejoiced in before the father that of those his father had given him he has lost none and no one can take his sheep from him. A God, who will not take the responsibility to see things through from beginning to end, cannot give such a guarantee. While this is the strength of the Christian's hope, Arminians have made several objections to it. Since God's grace is irresistible, why, if he desires that all people be saved, does he not bring it about?

It has been argued against freewill theism that there is nothing in the nature of God that precludes a sovereign God from loving

humanity and that believing both God is sovereign and humans are free is not absurd like believing in square circles. Since the Biblical writers affirm a compatible relation between the triune God's sovereignty and love for humans as well as God's sovereignty and human freedom, the freewill theist has to demonstrate that these are not compatible to make a successful case. However, if it can be successfully done then Biblical faith is lost. Positively, I have argued that given the human condition, a God who is limited by human freedom can be described as indifferent and apathetic but not as loving. Only a God who willingly and sovereignly partakes in human redemption can be described as loving humanity and the only coherent account of the biblical picture is one of a sovereign God. The sovereignty of God rests on certain premises which when accepted are more compatible with the God of the Bible—a God who loves humanity—than a God who is limited by human freedom.

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