

Testamentum Imperium
An International Theological Journal

www.PreciousHeart.net/ti

Volume 2 – 2009

**Divine Sovereignty and Divine Love
Contradiction or Necessary Complement?**

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Introduction

One of the vexing questions in theology is the existence of evil. If God is sovereign and the creator and sustainer of everything that is, how can there be evil unless that evil ensues in some way or another from God? Especially confronted as we are with the atrocities of the previous century, the godhead of God is often called into question. For instance, Richard Rubenstein, one of the representatives of the death-of-God theology, ponders that if there were a God, he could not have permitted Auschwitz to happen, and if he had, we would have to strip him of his divine office.³ Rubenstein as well as many others today have a certain notion of God; and if God does not coincide with that notion, the conclusion is not that the notion is wrong but that there is no credence to God. Yet Immanuel Kant cautioned that theodicy “might be merely the cause of our presumptuous Reason

¹ His books include *True Faith in the True God* (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1996, 160p), *Creation* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002, 254p), *Evil* (Academic Renewal Press, 2003, 240p), *Theology In A Global Context: The Last Two Hundred Years* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005, 597p), and *Eschatology* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001, 431p).

² See www.Uni-Regensburg.de/Universitaet/welcome2.html.

³ Richard Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz. Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), 87 and 153f.

which fails to recognize its limits.”⁴ In other words, Kant tells us that we might not be able to comprehend rationally how God is just.

Psalm 22 points us in a different direction. We remember that Jesus prayed this psalm when he was dying on the cross. It begins with the insistent cry of abandonment: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” But in calling Yahweh *his* God, and not simply God, the Psalmist is appropriating the promise of the covenant and salvation given to Israel. As Hans-Joachim Kraus explains in his commentary: “In the archetypal distress of abandonment by God he who laments clutches at ‘his God’.”⁵ Even in utmost distress, the petitioner knows that he has a right to expect help and salvation from his God. “Israel’s experience of deliverance (v. 3) is the consolation of the individual. Yahweh’s power has proved itself among the fathers, and the sufferer can console himself with this fact.” When we read the psalm to its end, we realize that the petitioner traverses a vast territory: from the depth of abandonment by God, the song of the rescued person rises to a worldwide hymn that draws even the dead into the great homage of Yahweh. The change from the distress over the abandonment by God to the praise and thanksgiving for Yahweh’s help affirms the experience of Israel’s deliverance throughout history. Yet is God the one that metes out evil and affliction? To answer this question, we must look somewhat deeper into the biblical account.

A. The Biblical Account

Considering the cause of evil, we think instinctively of the story of the Fall in Genesis 3. Yet this story is remarkably isolated from the rest of the Old Testament. It is neither taken up by the Psalmist, nor by the prophets, nor by any of the other Old Testament writers, though reading beyond Genesis 3 we notice that from the Fall sin spreads like a wildfire. It is only in the apocalyptic literature of late Judaism that we find an explanation of how evil originated. An archangel and those under him rebelled against God. So we read in the Slavonic Apocalypse of Enoch: “But one from the order of the archangels deviated, together with the division that was under his

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *The Failure of All Philosophical Attempt towards a Theodicy* (1791), in Gabriele Rabel, *Kant* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 233.

⁵ Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalm 1-59. A Commentary*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 295, for this and the following quote.

authority. He thought up the impossible idea, that he might place his own higher than the clouds which are above the earth, and that he might become equal to my power. And I hurled him out from the height, together with his angels. And he was flying around in the air, ceaselessly, above the Bottomless” (29:4f.).

In the Old Testament itself, however, the cause of evil is mentioned relatively late. The Old Testament states that evil and sin came through the appearance of the first man and the first woman, and they continue to disclose themselves with the appearance of humans. Yet the wickedness of humanity does not find its origin in God but rather in humanity alone. Ecclesiastes 7:29 states: “God made human beings straightforward, but they have devised many schemes.” While evil is a force distinct from God, we notice, for instance in the case of Job, that the “cause of evil” takes place in conjunction with God and not in opposition to him. In the story of Job, Satan functions as a heavenly opponent of a peaceful life and earthly comfort, but it is finally through God’s permission that Job is thrown into ever greater misery. The result of this “permission”, however, is not the destruction of Job, as one might fear; as a result of the fateful lot dealt to him, Job achieves a deeper piety and surrenders himself fully to God. We could understand “evil” here as divine punishment by which a person is moved closer to God.

But then there is 2 Samuel 24:1: “The anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, ‘Go, count the people of Israel and Judah.’” The Chronicler, however, reports the same event with the following words: “Satan stood up against Israel, and incited David to count the people of Israel” (1 Chron 21:1). When we compare here the Old with the New Testament, we notice a similar shift. In Hos 11:10 God is compared to a roaring lion, while in 1 Petr 5:8 the devil is called a “roaring lion.” The statement that God would incite David to sin was perhaps regarded objectionable at the time of the writing of Chronicles. In both versions, however, that of the Chronicler and that of the book of Samuel, we read that God decrees punishment for David’s sin. Nowhere in the Old Testament does Satan or the devil achieve the status of a dualistic opponent of God who restricts God to serving as the principle of the good. Even satanic temptation must further God’s redemptive plan. This can also be seen in the above account

concerning David. Because his royal power was diminished through God's punishment, David became more receptive to God's will.

From this passage it is evident that God was originally understood without exception as the source of both good and evil. Yet the tendency arose to see God's function in reference to the cause of evil only in judging humanity for its sinful behavior. This means that the cause of the activation of evil in humanity must be found outside of God: first in the temptation through a figure who is part of God's good creation (the serpent), then in the image of the heavenly accuser, and finally in the increasingly independent figure of a malevolent Satan. This process of clarification is continued with increased vigor in the New Testament.

From beginning to end the New Testament is characterized by the conflict between good and evil, God and the world, Jesus and Satan. A dualistic worldview, however, with God and anti-God as its two poles, cannot be found in the New Testament. Rather, the New Testament witnesses to a dynamic, aggressive conflict that begins with the work of Jesus and finds its continuation in the lives of Christians. Beginning with Jesus, we can discern evil as the adversary of God, and with the Apostle Paul we can speak of Sin.

In the New Testament, the story of Jesus is characterized by the absolute and irreconcilable contrast between God and Satan. The kingdom of God is present in and with Jesus Christ, which Satan seeks to destroy. The entire mission of Jesus can be understood as a continuous confrontation with Satan. When Jesus casts out demons, the acts are extensions of the greater purpose of casting out Satan. The story of the expulsion of Beelzebul by Jesus (Mk 3:26f.) makes it clear that Satan has found his conqueror. This fact is confirmed through each of Jesus' subsequent actions, up to and including his sacrificial death (1 Cor. 15:57). While Satan continues to accuse humans before God, Jesus counters these accusations with his intercessions so that their "faith may not fail" (Lk. 22:32). Indeed, Satan has lost his important position and his access to heaven, so Jesus could tell his disciples: "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning" (Lk. 10:18). This does not mean that the cause of evil and destruction should be taken lightly; but in principle, the prince of darkness is already dethroned.

But then what kind of sovereignty or power does God actually have? God's power is usually exhibited in the sphere of history, for which nature provides the framework. This emphasis on history comes as no surprise, since Israel is shaped from the very beginning by historical acts, such as the Exodus from Egypt and the deliverance at the Red Sea. Even the covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai must be seen in this context. "When the righteous of the OT are reminded of the power of God, they think of the act of God at the Red Sea which completed the Exodus. The power of God proved itself at a historically decisive hour apart from which there would be no worship of Yahweh and no Israel. The conclusion of the covenant clarifies the resultant obligation. It is a seal attached to the event of the Red Sea."⁶ In Judaism the supremacy of God as the creator and Lord of the world is maintained even though we hear of demons and satans. In the New Testament there is the closest possible connection between the power given to Christ and that of God. "The power of Christ is the power of God. ... Jesus as the Christ is the unique Bearer of divine power."⁷

Through Christ's resurrection and exaltation, the anti-godly powers are diminished in strength and will be publicly deprived of their power when Christ returns as Lord of all. Christ therefore answers the question of the power of salvation: when the disciples anxiously asked Jesus who can be saved, he responds: "For mortals it is impossible; but for God all things are possible" (Mt 19:26). This means no limited power has the ability to save, only the unlimited power of God alone. Therefore "the power of God in the Gospel consists in the fact that it mediates salvation, that by the Gospel God delivers man from the power of darkness and translates him into the kingdom of His dear Son."⁸ It is therefore not surprising that the assertion that nothing is impossible for God, though used only a few times in the Bible, occurs always in the context of assuring salvation. For instance, when God promises a descendant to Abraham and Sarah, he asks: "Is anything too wonderful [i.e., impossible] for the Lord?" (Gen 18:14). Similarly, in the context of the angel Gabriel's

⁶ Walter Grundmann, "dynamai, dynamis", *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 2:292.

⁷ Walter Grundmann, "dynamai, dynamis", 2:306.

⁸ Walter Grundmann, "dynamai, dynamis", 2:309.

visitation of Mary, we hear him declare that “nothing will be impossible with God” (Lk. 1:37).

In the biblical accounts, God’s sovereignty is never used to demonstrate God’s power in a capricious or ostentatious way, but to assure that God’s word will not return empty. His promises will surely be fulfilled. Therefore the relation between God’s power and that of the anti-godly or evil forces is only touched upon in such a way that they cannot thwart God’s plans for the coming kingdom. Whether God is sovereign and omnipotent in an absolute sense, i.e. that God can do whatever God pleases, is of no interest in the biblical accounts, since such sovereignty has no existential significance. But how, then, does the Reformed tradition come to emphasize God’s sovereignty so much, even to the extent of divine foreordination?

B. The Position of John Calvin

If we read Calvin’s statements on divine sovereignty without a historical context, especially what he said concerning predestination, then his view sounds very deterministic, if not mechanistic. There seems to be no room left for human initiative, because everything proceeds according to God’s preordained plan. We read, for instance, in the opening sentence on the *Articles Concerning Predestination*, probably one of the later writings of Calvin: “Before the first man was created, God in his eternal council had determined what he willed to be done with the whole human race.”⁹ We should not forget, however, that at this point Calvin is heavily influenced by Augustine, in much the same way that Augustine influenced Martin Luther. For instance, before talking about human free will in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin shows that Augustine does not eliminate human will but makes it wholly dependent on God’s grace. Calvin even uses the metaphor of the human person resembling a horse who is either driven by the devil or guided by God. This metaphor apparently stems from a pseudo-Augustinian writing and is used also by Martin Luther in his *Bondage of the Will*.¹⁰

⁹ John Calvin, *Articles on Predestination*, in: *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, trans. with intro. and notes J.K.S. Reid, *Library of Christian Classics*, vol. 22 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 179. Cf. also p. 178 where Reid states that the theses were written relatively late.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2.4), ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, *Library of Christian Classics*, vol. 20 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 309 and n. 3. Cf. Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), *LW* 33:65f.

While Luther distinguished clearly between external matters, in which we have a free will, and those matters pertaining to salvation, where we have no choice but to rely on God's grace, Calvin is hesitant to admit such a distinction. He declares: "Whether you will or not, daily experience compels you to realize that your mind is guided by God's prompting rather than your own freedom to choose."¹¹ It is always God's special grace that leads us through life. Since Satan acts also as God's instrument and must ultimately serve God's purposes, which fallen humanity follows willingly, Calvin concludes: "We see no inconsistency in assigning the same deed to God, Satan and man; but the distinction in purpose and manner causes God's righteousness to shine forth blameless there, while the wickedness of Satan and of man betrays itself by its own disgrace."¹² God is considered to be absolutely sovereign: God is not just in full control of everything, but also ordains and preordains everything. In his treatises *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, Calvin writes: "Before the beginning of the world, we were both ordained to faith and also elected to the inheritance of heavenly life. Hence arises an impregnable security."¹³ It is interesting that in the Latin edition, the addition of the French version, "as our Lord Jesus himself says," is omitted. Perhaps Calvin realized that a scriptural grounding of this assertion, especially concerning the "impregnable security" of the elect, can hardly be deduced.

Why is Calvin so determined concerning predestination? There may be a clue in the following statement: "First, the eternal predestination of God, by which before the fall of Adam He decreed what should take place concerning the whole human race and every individual, was fixed and determined. Secondly, Adam himself, on account of his defection, is appointed to death. Lastly, in his person now fallen and lost, all his offspring is condemned in such a way that God deems worthy of the honor of adoption those whom he gratuitously elects out of it."¹⁴ The point which Calvin makes here is similar to that of Augustine, to whom Calvin refers consistently.

¹¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2.4.7), 315.

¹² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2.4.2), 311.

¹³ John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans. with an intro. J.K.S. Reid (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997 [1961]), 57.

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, 121.

Calvin is convinced that through Adam all of humanity collectively and each person individually are sinful and deserve nothing but eternal damnation. Yet out of sheer grace, God elects some to faith. Since God foreknows everything, however, this election already takes place before the fall of Adam. This means that grace stands at the beginning, even before the fall.

It is not through some kind of primordial decree that God arbitrarily elects some to eternal bliss and others to eternal punishment; rather, by foreknowing the fall and out of his eternal graciousness, God decrees that some will be spared and lifted up from sinfulness and decay. Predestination emphasizes the sovereignty of God and assures that grace is not an afterthought, something that was necessitated by the fall of Adam. It was present with God from the very beginning. So we one can truly speak about the triumph of grace.

While divine election is gratuitously given, Calvin also asserts that “the salvation of men is bound to faith, and that Christ is the only door by which all must enter into the heavenly kingdom; nor is tranquil peace to be found elsewhere than in the Gospel.”¹⁵ There is no automatic salvation. In order to be saved, we must cling to Christ and appropriate his saving activity for us. But again, since we can do nothing of our own power, such faith is ultimately God’s own doing.

While one has not too much difficulty with Calvin’s reasoning regarding salvation, the question as to how God is implicated with the fate of those who are not among the elect proves somewhat daunting. Here Calvin asserts over and over again: “It must be observed that the will of God is the cause of all things that happen in the world; and yet God is not the author of evil.”¹⁶ This apparent contradiction between God as the cause of all things that occur in the world on the one hand, and God not being the author of evil on the other, becomes even greater when Calvin asserts that evils do not occur merely by God’s permission but come about by God’s own will. At the same time he asserts “that they are not pleasing to God.”¹⁷ Calvin must have sensed that problem himself, for he states in the *Article Concerning*

¹⁵ John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, 113

¹⁶ John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, 169.

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, 176.

Predestination: “They are ignorant and malicious who say that God is the author of sin, since all things are done by his will or ordination; for they do not distinguish between the manifest wickedness of men and the secret judgments of God.”¹⁸ So we return to the issue we mentioned at the beginning: if God is in control, why does he allow the wickedness of humanity to rule? Calvin refers here to the “secret judgments of God.” While God is not the author of sin—a statement which corroborates with the biblical testimony—the fact that sin still rules supreme in this world is for Calvin one of the secrets of God. In other words, Calvin has no answer.

Calvin is convinced that when God works through evil people, true evil occurs; and yet in the end it will all come out well. Therefore he writes: “While the devil and the reprobate are ministers and organs of God and promote his secret judgments, God nevertheless in an incomprehensible way operates in and through them, so that he restrains nothing of their wickedness, because their malice is justly and rightly used to a good end, while the means are often hidden from us.” Similarly to Martin Luther, Calvin asserts that God as pure act is continuously at work and therefore acts in evil persons according to their evil intents. But Luther asserts on the one hand that God and the anti-godly powers are fighting each other, while on the other hand he maintains that God is superior to these powers. He then leaves this obvious paradox unresolved. Calvin, however, asserts only the superiority of God and therefore can be much more optimistic than Luther with regard to earthly affairs. God is in control, and the destructive forces must always serve his ends. What significance does this have in present-day Reformed theology?

C. Contemporary Facets

We will here consider only Karl Barth, the premier Reformed theologian of the 20th century. When we ask him about the issue of predestination, we hear: “At no level do we come upon a foreordination of man which is a foreordination to evil, to the dominion to this spirit of negation, to the distress which results from this dominion. The real foreordination of man is to attestation of the

¹⁸ John Calvin, *Articles Concerning Predestination*, 180, for this and the following quote.

divine glory, to blessedness and to eternal life.”¹⁹ There is no double predestination in such a way that those chosen for blessedness and those condemned to perdition even out. Barth is adamant that this concept must be opposed with all the emphasis at our disposal. Nevertheless, there is a double predestination, because “there is a leftward election.”²⁰ Barth claims that in Lutheran doctrinal development the decree of election merges into the decree of salvation and there disappears. He concedes that “we must adopt at least the intention of the Lutheran doctrine in so far as it aimed to establish the christological basis of the election.”²¹ What does this christological base mean?

In Jesus Christ we encounter a being both truly human and truly God. Therefore Barth asserts that in Christ we encounter not only the elected human being, but also the truly and freely electing God. In Christ “God willed that the object of this election should be Himself and not man. God removed from man and took upon Himself the burden of the evil which unavoidably threatened and actually achieved and exercised dominion in the world that He had ordained as the theatre of His glory. God removed from man and took upon Himself the suffering which resulted from this dominion, including the condemnation of sinful man.”²² This means that Christ did not simply suffer for sinful humanity but was actually condemned in our place. Barth concludes: “If God has reserved for Himself the reckoning with evil, all that man can do is to take what is allotted to him by God. But this is nothing more or less than God’s own glory.”²³

But what does this mean for salvation? It could either mean “absolute universalism, or the hesitant admission that some may opt out.”²⁴ Yet Barth does not opt for some kind of *apokatastasis panton* (salvation for all). He writes: “The Church will not then preach an *apokatastasis*, nor will it preach a powerless grace of Jesus Christ or a

¹⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2: *The Doctrine of God*, 2nd half vol., ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), 171.

²⁰ Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of God*, 172.

²¹ Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of God*, 75.

²² Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of God*, 172.

²³ Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of God*, 173.

²⁴ D.A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty & Human Responsibility. Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (Atlanta: John Know, 1981), 216, in his insightful comments on Barth’s doctrine of election.

wickedness of men which is too powerful for it. But without any weakening of the contrast, and also without any arbitrary dualism, it will preach the overwhelming power of grace and the weakness of human wickedness in face of it.”²⁵ Barth’s diminution of human sinfulness and wickedness goes together with him calling evil “nothingness” and not wanting to accord it any self-sufficient existence independent from God.²⁶ The gracious will of God is so strongly emphasized by Barth that what strives and works against God cannot approach a genuine existence. Ultimately, everything will be received into the salvific realm of God. Barth argues always from the grace of God, from God’s covenant with humanity.

While Barth does not want to teach an *apokatastasis*, he still feels it is right to ponder whether that concept does not have some positive significance, though he feels it could lead to antinomianism and an inappropriate laissez-faire approach to God. He claims he is sure “that we have no theological right to set any sort of limits to the loving-kindness of God which has appeared in Jesus Christ.”²⁷ Barth rejects the idea of an *apokatastasis*, since he regards it as a product of human fantasy, the result of human calculations which would then restrict God’s freedom.²⁸ He sees in this idea the human claim that God eventually has to save all people. Yet such an idea is the result of human conceit.

For Barth, the universal hope is grounded in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, when Christ suffered in our place and was rejected instead of us. Yet one wonders whether if, similarly to Origen, Barth understands evil as simply an epiphenomenon that either goes away through God’s power or is finally integrated into the whole of salvation. While we agree with Barth that we should hope for the salvation of all, his hope is solidified into a doctrine, that of the election of all. All are elected and will be received into God’s fold. It is difficult to see how that differs from the very *apokatastasis*

²⁵ Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of God*, 477.

²⁶ For Barth’s understanding of nothingness, cf. Hans Schwarz, *Evil: A Historical and Theological Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 163-8.

²⁷ Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*, trans. Thomas Wieser (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1960), 62.

²⁸ Rolf Rochusch, in his 1974 dissertation *Untersuchung über die Stellung Karl Barths zur Lehre von der Apokatastasis in der “Kirchlichen Dogmatik”*: Darstellung und Auseinandersetzung mit der Kritik (Kirchliche Hochschule Berlin), 196-7 and 292.

which Barth rejects. Ultimately Barth does exactly what he does not want to do: limit God's freedom and sovereignty. Just how close he comes to advocating universalism and a mono-linear mind of God can be seen when he ponders: "Even there, in the midst of hell, when it [the creature] thinks of God and His election it can think only of the love and grace of God. The resolve and power of our opposition cannot put any limit to the power and resolve of God."²⁹ There is no opting out of the salvational plan possible for humanity and even for the whole created order. Berkouwer is certainly right when he says that "the theme of the triumph of grace dominates the whole of Barth's dogmatic thinking."³⁰ All of history is a divine spectacle preordained and executed by God. This kind of sovereignty, however, diminishes humanity to mere puppets, and love is no longer a free exchange but something primordially decreed.

Here the vision of Jürgen Moltmann, also from the Reformed tradition, is much more dynamic. It is also not as anthropocentric as Barth's perspective. Moltmann's starting point is not a primordially decreed destiny. He begins with the foundational experience of the Christian church when he states concerning the believers: "The transfiguration of life in Easter joy which they experience is no more than a small beginning of the transfiguration of the whole cosmos. ... Out of the resurrection of Christ, joy throws open cosmic and eschatological perspectives that reach forward to the redemption of the whole cosmos. A redemption for what? In the feast of eternal joy all created beings and the whole community of God's creation are destined to sing their hymns and songs of praise."³¹ This dynamic opposition of a new creation issuing forth from the resurrection event presupposes a sovereign God. Yet this sovereignty is channeled into bringing forth new life in all of God's creation, eternal life to be enjoyed forever. Without divine sovereignty there can be no divine love and no new creation, but divine sovereignty shows itself in the incarnation only retrospectively, namely from the turning point of the resurrection.

²⁹ Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of God*, 27.

³⁰ Gerrit C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. Harry R. Boer (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1956), 52.

³¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God. Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 338.

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