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**The Irrevocable Nature of Salvation as
Manifestation of God’s Attributes¹**

Dr. Jonathan M. Waita²

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Introduction

Irrevocability or its opposite revocability makes sense in a covenantal transaction. In our case here, the transaction is between God, who pledges to save the believer on the one hand, and the person who, in accordance with God’s foreordination, puts their faith in Christ, on the other hand. The resulting salvation is irrevocable for two major reasons—axiomatic and teleological. Axiomatically, the irrevocability of salvation is grounded on God’s attributes. In other words, salvation is irrevocable because it is not guaranteed by man,

¹ Adopted with slight modification from unpublished Jonathan Mutinda Waita, “Carl F. H. Henry and the Metaphysical Foundations of Epistemology” (Ph.D diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 2012).

² Jonathan M. Waita, B.Th. (Scott Theological College, Machakos, Kenya), Th.M. and Ph.D, Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, Texas [USA], is an Adjunct Professor of Theology, Apologetics, and Church History, Liberty University Baptist Theological Seminary, www.Liberty.edu/seminary.

who is fallible by nature, but by God, who is perfect by nature. Teleologically, the ultimate goal of salvation is God's honor and glory.

I. The Attributes of God as the Axiom of the Irrevocability of Salvation

Since the Triune God invites the sinner to enter into a (salvific) covenantal relationship with him, it is prudential for the sinner to know whether this God has sufficient knowledge of the sinner's needs, has sufficient ability to meet the sinner's needs, and has moral integrity to be trusted. In other words, it is helpful for the sinner to know the character of the God he is invited to enter into a covenantal relationship with. A breakdown of God's character is referred to as divine attributes. The attributes of God constitute one topic that has attracted theological attention, with various suggestions given as to how we can best categorize them. For us to better appreciate the divine attributes, we need to mention various suggestions for the classification of the attributes.

A. Classification of the Attributes

According to scholastic theology, divine attributes could be nuanced in the following manner: (1) *via causalitatis* (by causality), in which all observable perfections in nature are attributed to their divine creator; (2) *via negationis* (by negation), in which the imperfections of nature are recognized as not reflective of the glory of God, (and to which belong such divine attributes as infinity, immutability, immortality, and impassibility); and (3) *via analogia, via eminentia* (by analogy or eminence) in which the highest conceivable perfections are attributed to God, (with such attributes as omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, and omnibenevolence serving as examples).³ Another way is to subject the divine attributes to absolute and relative (essential and non-essential) taxonomy, where attributes touching on God's very nature, like eternity, are contrasted with others centered on his relationship to his creatures, like, creation, governance, and providence.⁴ Others have categorized the attributes into communicable and incommunicable classification, giving such

³ Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature (1981), s.v "God", 908.

⁴ Ibid.

examples of communicable attributes as goodness, holiness, and wisdom, while reserving such attributes as eternity, immutability, and immensity for God.⁵

There are yet two other options we can adopt to appreciate divine attributes—viz., *via negativa*, as suggested by *apophatic* theology, and *via affirmativa*, as advocated by *cataphatic* theology.⁶ Once the Bible is correctly recognized as the axiom of theology, it is the conviction of this researcher that the *cataphatic* view of the divine attributes makes more sense than the *apophatic* one.

B. The Divine Attributes

The cardinal of such attributes is God’s aseity. The aseity of the Triune God refers to his infinitely perfect ‘under-standing’ of himself.⁷ A corollary to divine aseity is divine necessity. Suffice it to say that divine aseity is grounded on God’s אֲהִיָּה אֲשֶׁר אֲהִיָּה (“I AM WHO I AM”); self-introduction to Moses in Exodus 3:14.⁸ From God’s self-introduction, we gather a fundamental metaphysical truth, which has important bearing on human soteriological security. God’s ontological “reality” is independent of man’s decision. In other words, while good theology must begin with a presupposition of a God who revealed himself generally and specifically, God owes his existence to himself rather than one’s presupposition, correct as it may be.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *Apophatic* theology, which gained popularity in the middle ages, was popularized by the 5th-6th century mystic theologian/philosopher, Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite. See Winfried Corduan, “Via Negativa,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (2001), 1246. In contradistinction to cataphatic theology which conceptualizes the attributes of God *via affirmativa* (by way of affirmation), apophatic theology conceptualizes divine attributes *via negativa* (by way of negation). Apophatic theology tends to take the ineffability of God to its extreme, while cataphatic theology emphasizes the knowability of God. If apophatic theology has propensity to degenerate into epistemological skepticism, cataphatic theology risked being accused of epistemic arrogance. Since epistemological confidence and/or skepticism accrue from the basic epistemic axioms, an orthodox Christian theologian whose confidence in the knowability of God is based on the Bible can justifiably plead innocent to the charge of epistemic arrogance.

⁷ Ibid., 5:11-13. Far from bearing a cognitive force, ‘under-standing’ as herein used by Henry, connotes ‘ground’. Hence, God “stands under” himself as the ontological ground of himself, since he alone is eternally *a se* (emanating from himself) ‘Under-standing’ has also an epistemological force, pointing to God’s infinite knowledge of himself.

⁸ The perfect correspondence of the Yahweh’s אֲהִיָּה אֲשֶׁר אֲהִיָּה and Christ’s declaration, “ἐγὼ εἶμι”, is demonstrated in John 8:58, where the Jews respond with an attempt to stone Christ for allegedly committing blasphemy. While the Jews rightly understand Christ’s theistic claim in his appropriation of the durative present εἶμι to himself, πρὶν Ἀβραάμ γενέσθαι “before Abraham was born” (John 8:58), they err in concluding that Christ had no prerogative to lay claim to deity.

Because God, alone is *principium essendi (principium existendi)*,⁹ the foundation of being, all programs which affect mankind begin and terminate in him. Salvation is actively a divine act, and only passively a human act.

Another attribute akin to divine aseity is divine eternity. We concur with Henry on the importance and difficulties of conceptualizing divine eternity, when he observes:

The way humans conceive divine eternity has great significance for human belief and action not only in Christianity but also in nonbiblical religions like Buddhism and Hinduism. The word eternal carries various nuances such as everlasting and unending, unchanging and unalterable, perfect and unbetterable. A verdict on the character of divine eternity therefore affects both the destiny of man and the nature of God.¹⁰

It is not enough to affirm divine eternity. We need to also, establish what constitutes divine eternity. Herein we find two competing views—viz., omnitemporality and supratemporality (timelessness). Henry's suggestion is herein helpful, "The God of Christian orthodoxy is supratemporally eternal as the mainstream theologians like Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas, the Protestant Reformers, and in fact, most Christian theologians affirm."¹¹ The view of divine eternity as constitutive of divine timelessness may be supported by the fact that God created the universe not in time, but with time.¹² God's eternity has an important bearing on the longevity of human salvation. It is the eternal God alone who can guarantee eternity of human salvation.

⁹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Prolegomena*, trans. John Vriend, vol. 1, 4 vols., ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2003), 1:13. Although Bavinck's contribution here is on the foundations of theology, in which he ascribes to the Father the prerogative of grounding all essence, what is ontologically true of the Father is true also, of the other members of the Holy Trinity.

¹⁰ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 6 vols. (Waco, TX: Word Books Publisher, 1976-83), 5:239.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Cf., Augustine, "The Confessions of St. Augustin," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: The Confessions and Letters of Augustin with a Sketch of His Life and Work*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 1. 14 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers Inc., 1999), 167. Augustin contrasts eternity's fixity with time's transitoriness, 167. And Anselm, "Proslogium," in *Proslogium; Monologium; On Behalf of the Fool* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co., 1958), 25.

¹² While God's creation of the universe *in time* may imply *ante creational*, if not actually eternal existence of time, creation with time, implies inclusion of time itself as a created phenomenon. For a similar discussion, see Gordon R. Lewis, "God, Attributes of," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (2001), 494.

Closely related to divine eternity is divine necessity. God as the ground of everything is ontologically necessary. God is absolutely necessary for there to be. Orthodox theology presupposes divine ontological indispensability. Medieval Christian theology and philosophy agreed with the adage of Boëthius¹³ (A.D 480-524[5?]) that “*Diversum est esse et id quod est*” (*What a thing is and that it is are diverse*),¹⁴ in respect to contingent reality, while emphasizing that it is God alone in whom essence (whatness) and quiddity (isness) are identical.¹⁵ Contingent existence is potential existence. For a potentiality to become real, it must be actualized. God on the other hand, is necessary. God can simply, not not be. Henry reiterates this point when he observes:

The Bible allows philosophers to ponder, as a mark of man’s alienated spiritual relationship, whether God is logically inconceivable, logically impossible, or logically necessary. The Bible itself, instead of asking whether God is logically necessary, grounds the very necessity even of logic in God’s own intellect. Viewing God as *ontologically* necessary, the Bible thus implies a specific view of logical necessity and of the nature of logic; that is, God is necessary to explain the world—a declaration far different from the speculative question of logical necessity.¹⁶

God is not a metaphysically vacuous idea. He is real. Because God is necessarily real, the salvation he provides is real.

Another attribute to discuss is divine creativity. The Greeks understood God as the primordial being, while the Latin understood him as the primordial substance.¹⁷ Fearing that these concepts risk reducing God to nothing more than the ontological ground of realities of the same genus, Henry clarifies:

The basic meaning of substance is to *stand under*; substance is that on which all else depends but which itself depends on nothing. The self-revealed God is the

¹³ His full name is Anicius Manlius Severinus Boëthius.

¹⁴ Boëthius quoted in Ralph McInerny, *St. Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 94.

¹⁵ If ‘H’ were to represent the essence (Whatness) of the universal idea of humanity, and ‘p’ represented a particular (Isness) reality of a person, Paul, it would be possible for ‘H’ to pre-exist and post-exist ‘p’, or even exist in total exclusion of ‘p,’ without any jeopardy to the ontological structure of ‘H’. This is true because ‘p’ owes its existence to ‘H’ and not the other way round. While it is possible for humanity ‘H’ to exist without a particular person ‘p’ Paul, it is logically impossible to have the essence (Whatness) of God (divinity) without the being quiddity (Isness) of God.

¹⁶ Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 5:259.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 5:11.

transcendent source and support of the space-time universe. God is substance in the several senses of living self-subsisting divine nature and of standing under or being under all other reality as its creator and preserver. God is therefore substance as existent reality, as opposed to nonbeing, or mere appearance and shadow.¹⁸

Another divine attribute that has an important bearing on the eternal security of the believer is divine omniscience. Divine omniscience had been an important subject of discussion among theologians and philosophers alike, long before Henry came into the scene. The scholastic scholarship as epitomized by the theologian-cum-philosopher, Thomas Aquinas shows great interest in the psychology of knowledge. Since the premodern tradition to which Aquinas belonged predicated epistemology on metaphysics, a brief introduction of Aquinas's metaphysics is necessary for an appreciation of his epistemology in general, and his concept of divine omniscience, in particular.¹⁹ For Aquinas, therefore, there are clear ontological reasons for the distinction between divine and creaturely knowledge. Human knowledge is sensorial, and is acquired discursively and mediately by reason. Without senses, angels do not think. Angelic knowledge is immediate, and is acquired by intellection,²⁰ while God's knowledge is perfect, everything therein known by intuition in the eternal now.²¹ Although Henry does not belong to Aquinas's epistemological trajectory, he seems to concur with Aquinas on the intuitive nature of God's knowledge when he asserts:

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ For Aquinas, all reality admits of act versus potency taxonomy. Aquinas recognizes God as ontologically unique in that He is the only Pure Act, in whom there is no potentiality, and in contradistinction to whom every other reality is contingent (James F. Anderson, *An Introduction to the Metaphysics of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Chicago Henry Regnery Co., 1969), 31. These contingent realities owe their being/existence to their actualization by God, the Pure Act. In the realm of contingent beings, there exists, in Aquinas's mind, an ontological gradation between angelic and human beings, with completed potency being attributed to angels (owing to their non-corporeal nature), while uncompleted potency is attributed to human beings (owing to their composite nature of corporeality and non-corporeality) (Norman L. Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 185.

²⁰ Paul J. Glenn, *A Tour of the Summa* (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, 1978), 47.

²¹ Hampus Lyttkens, *The Analogy between God and the World: An Investigation of Its Background and Interpretation of Its Use by Thomas Aquinas* (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksell Boktryckeri 1952), 193.

God intuitively possesses truth because he has self-consciousness of his own nature and of what he can and will do. In knowing himself he eternally and exhaustively knows all objects of knowledge. His knowledge of man and the world has its source in his self-knowledge, because God knew what he would make. God’s knowledge of what would be is grounded in his knowledge of his eternal purpose.²²

While reiterating the evangelical concept of divine knowledge as timelessly eternal, Henry rejects Boëthius’s view of divine knowledge “in terms of an everlasting now,” in favor of one in which “God’s knowledge of all things in a single act implies “a timeless intellectual vision whereby he eternally knows all things.”²³ Fearing that the “eternal now” rendition of divine omniscience would obscure temporal succession of events, Henry argues, “It is therefore one thing to say that God simultaneously knows all things—past, present and future—and quite another to insist that he knows them only in an eternal “now”²⁴

Modern debate on the omniscience of God tends to concentrate on divine foreknowledge, which, in turn, focuses on the object of divine foreknowledge, rather than the nature of that foreknowledge. Four major schools of thought have arisen from this debate—viz., the open theism view, the simple-foreknowledge view, the middle knowledge view, and the Augustinian-Calvinist view.

The open theism view holds that God knows future action of a free agent as a possibility (“a may be”) rather than settled facts, since divine knowledge of the future human actions as settled would be tantamount to curtailing human freedom.²⁵ Hence, for open theism, human freedom is so important that God chooses to compromise his foreknowledge to make human kind genuinely free.

Another school is that of the simple-foreknowledge, represented by David Hunt. This simple-foreknowledge school holds that God

²² Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 5:269.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 5:276.

²⁵ Gregory A. Boyd, “The Open-Theism View,” in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 20. Boyd, one of the major proponents of this school puts this view this audaciously, “Our omnipotent Creator is able to predict our behavior far more extensively than we could predict it ourselves because he knows us far better than we know ourselves (Ps (sic) 44:21; 139: 1-6). This does not mean that our every move is predictable, for our present character doesn’t exhaustively determine our future behavior. But it does mean that our future behavior is predictable to the extent that our present character is solidified.”

simply knows what will come to pass, and refuses to speculate on what grounds or motivates divine foreknowledge.²⁶

The third school—i.e., the middle-knowledge school advocated by William Lane Craig, is, far from being new, a resurrection of *scientia media*,²⁷ advocated by Louis De Molina (1535-1600). Molina's interest was in maintaining divine omniscience without jeopardizing authentic human freedom.²⁸ Pohle finds in Christ's declaration that Tyre and Sidon would have repented with genuine remorse if they had witnessed the miracles that the stubborn Corozain and Bethsaida were witnessing (Matt. 11:21ff), the ground for Molinist view of divine knowledge of *actus liber conditionate futuris seu futuribilis* (a conditional future occurrence).²⁹ For Molina and Craig, therefore, because divine omniscience entails God's comprehensive knowledge of not only this world, and every possible world, but also what each moral being would freely choose to do under particular circumstance, God providentially actualizes the world in such a way that the moral being would freely choose the desired action.

The fourth and last school of thought is the Augustinian-Calvinist view supported by Paul Helm. This school rejects the open theism view on the grounds that the latter minimizes the extent of human predicament while at the same time granting human indeterministic freedom to choose or reject Christ.³⁰ Helm rejects the simple-foreknowledge view on the grounds that it subjects divine

²⁶ See David Hunt, "The Simple-Foreknowledge View," in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 67.

²⁷ *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* (1981), s.v. "Molinism," 442. Cf. William Lane Craig, "The Middle-Knowledge View," in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 121.

²⁸ Joseph Pohle, "Molinism," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (1913). The following comment by Pohle throws some needed light on Molinist concept of divine middle knowledge, "The justification of this name Molina found (*sic*) in the consideration that, in addition to the Divine knowledge of the purely possible (*scientia simplicis intelligentia*) and the knowledge of the actually existing (*scientia visionis*), there must be a third kind of "intermediate knowledge", which embraces all objects that are found neither in the region of pure possibility nor strictly in that of actuality, but partake equally of both extremes and in some sort belong to both kinds of knowledge," 439.

²⁹ *Ibid.* For a similar view on divine knowledge of counterfactuals, see J. Carl Laney Jr., "God," in *Understanding Christian Theology*, ed. Charles R. Swindoll and Roy B. Zuck (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003), 182. By citing Carl Laney's concurrence on divine knowledge of counterfactuals, we are by no means attempting to brand him a Molinist.

³⁰ Paul Helm, "The Augustinian-Calvinist View," in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 64.

foreknowledge and human freedom to dialectical treatment.³¹ The Augustinian-Calvinist view predicates divine foreknowledge on divine foreordination, and chides the middle-knowledge for basing divine foreordination on his foreknowledge of the free choices of his moral agents.³²

We find an unambiguously Augustinian-Calvinist stance in this lengthy statement on divine knowledge by Henry:

There is nothing contradictory in saying that God knows all things simultaneously, and that within this comprehensive knowledge he distinguishes between what is forever true and factual and what is temporally contingent. . . . In the knowledge of his own nature and will God knows all his purposes with respect to as yet nonexistent objects and events. He eternally knows them as they will be, are now, and have been. God has knowledge of the universe through his own thoughts and purposes. Though it was fashioned with and in time, God knew the created universe conceptually and eternally through his decree to create. . . . His plan of a finite creation, present in the divine mind from eternity, became an accomplished fact by an exercise of divine volition. God purposed a temporal creation; time became a creaturely reality only within the actuality of creation. In creating the universe God related himself to conditions of space and time that had not prevailed until the creation, in as much as extension and succession are not predicable of divine ideas. Although God's knowledge is not knowledge in succession, he has knowledge of succession. Here one might take a cue from Augustine and show how ridiculous it would be to contend that God is spatial because he knows space.³³

We deduce a quasi-concurrence with George Berkeley's metaphysical statement, "*Esse est percipi* (To be is to be perceived) in Henry's predication of the existence of the universe on its intuition by God in the above assertion, "His plan of a finite creation, present in the divine mind from eternity, became an accomplished fact by an exercise of divine volition. God purposed a temporal creation; time became a creaturely reality only with actuality of creation."³⁴ A similar concept on the omniscience of God is found in Clark, who

³¹ Ibid., 114.

³² Ibid., 158-9. For a view similar to the Augustinian-Calvinist, see Edgar C. James, "Is Foreknowledge Equivalent to Foreordination?," in *Vital Theological Issues: Examining Enduring Issues of Theology*, ed. Roy B. Zuck, Vital Issues Series (Grand Rapids: Kregel Resources, 1994). That for James, the relationship between divine foreknowledge and foreordination is that of knowledge to will is found in this statement, ". . . the biblical meaning of foreknowledge is equivalent to foreordination, both describing the same act, one stressing the element of knowledge and the other that of will", 25.

³³ Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 5:276-7.

³⁴ Ibid., 5:276.

agreeably presents the following quotations from Stephen Charnock's book, *The Existence and Attributes of God*:

God knows himself because his knowledge with his will is the cause of all other things; . . . he is the first truth, and therefore, he is the first object of his understanding. . . . As he is all knowledge, so he hath in himself the most excellent object of knowledge. . . . No object is so intelligible to God as God is to himself. . . for his understanding is his essence, himself. . . . God knows his own decree and will, and therefore must know all things. . . . God must know what he hath decreed to come to pass. . . . God must know because he willed them. . . he therefore knows them because he knows what he willed. The knowledge of God cannot rise from the things themselves, for then the knowledge of God would have a cause without him. . . . As God sees things possible in the glass of his own power, so he sees things future in the glass of his own will.³⁵

Conversely, Henry chides atheists for their view that belief in existence of God is incompatible with human free choice,³⁶ and Christian theists, who naively encourage that misconception by regarding “divine foreknowledge and foreordination as antithetical to voluntary human choice, and (confusing) the latter with arbitrary choice or liberty of indifference. . . .”³⁷ God's unlimited knowledge includes his foreknowledge and predestination of the beneficiaries of his salvation. The Bible relates man's salvation to divine omniscience when it states “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified (Rom. 8:29-30).”

Having discussed divine omniscience, we now turn to divine omnipotence. Divine omnipotence may be defined as “God's ability to do all things that are proper objects of his power,”³⁸ Henry finds a close semantic correspondence between this Latin term

³⁵ Gordon Haddon Clark, *Logic* (Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1985), 120.

³⁶ The incompatibilist view is based on the heterodox view of freedom in the libertarian sense, rather than freedom in the sense of the absence of compulsion or coercion. This is implied in Douglas C. Langston, *God's Willing Knowledge: The Influence of Scotus' Analysis of Omniscience* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986), 26.

³⁷ Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 5:280. Incidentally the view of incompatibilism of divine foreknowledge and human free will is the rationale of open theism.

³⁸ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2006), 302.

“omnipotence,” and the Greek title *pantokratōr*, which carries the English force of “The Almighty.”³⁹ Citing approvingly, Aquinas’s habit of distinguishing between *potentia ordinata* and *potentia absoluta*, Henry asserts, “According to the Bible, God’s absolute power is revealed through creation, redemption, and judgment.”⁴⁰ Henry laments that with the increasing tendency of modern philosophers to predicate the universe on “immanent causal sequences”, *potentia absoluta* is relegated to “divine miraculous intervention.”⁴¹ Seeing divine omnipotence as an integral property of God’s being, Henry states:

God has absolute power to be himself internally and externally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. His omnipotence does not exhaust itself either in his supernatural creative or redemptive work. For this reason are not only his continuing preservation of the universe and protracted reconciliation of sinners possible, but also his coming eschatological consummation of all things.⁴²

Henry argues to the effect that omnipotence does not have an independent ontological existence outside of God, when he asserts, “The self-disclosed God of the Bible is indeed omnipotent, not because divinity qualifies a neutral countless conception of power, but because power is itself a defining divine attribute.”⁴³ Henry seems to concur with the scholastic metaphysics’ contention that God’s inability to sin or die is a manifestation of potency rather than impotency, since sinning and dying are pseudo-tasks—privations, and inability to sin cannot be a sign of privation any more than lack of lack can be lack of any ontological thing at all.⁴⁴ The fact that for Henry, divine omnipotence does not mean God’s subjection of the universe to arbitrary and chaotic order is found in this clear statement,

³⁹ Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 5:308.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid. This habit of restricting absolute divine act to the miraculous, while at the same time predicating the universe on immanent (natural) causal sequences has propensity to create two parallel sources of providence—God and nature.

⁴² Ibid., 5:314.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 5:319. Henry argues, “God’s will or nature implies certain limitations on his actions and normatively defines the very conception of omnipotence in terms of his own omnipotence. That God will not alter his own nature, that he cannot deny himself, that he cannot lie and cannot sin, that he cannot be deceived, and that, moreover, he cannot die, are affirmations which historic Christian theology has always properly associated with divine omnipotence and not with divine limitation or divine impotency, because the “possibility” as stated is a logical impossibility.

“Having willed moral and mathematical distinction in the creation of the universe, God will not affirm vice to be virtue or two times two to be three; he is faithful to himself and to the relative unity and continuity he wills for his creation.”⁴⁵ Henry is quick to correct any misconception that God is bound by the laws of nature, when he states:

This constancy does not imply an ontological or logical or moral order independent of God to which God must conform his omnipotence. . . .The law of contradiction does not set limits to which God must conform; God himself wills the law of contradiction as integral to both divine and human meaning. The nature of God is logical. God could indeed have willed that two times two equal five, but he could not have so willed if we are to retain the usual meaning of two and five.⁴⁶

God’s omnipotence has an important bearing on human salvation. God has unlimited power to save the sinner. The epistle of Jude ends with this tribute to God’s soteriological ability, “To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen” (Jude. 1:24-25).

Divine immutability is another topic worth discussing in the context of the irrevocability of salvation. Citing for his scriptural support such passages as Psalm 19:21, 33:11; Isaiah 46:10 and Numbers 23:19, Henry clarifies that divine immutability is both metaphysical and ethical, with the metaphysical grounding the ethical.⁴⁷ Henry believes that, far from being detrimental to human freedom, the moral implication of divine immutability is that redeemed mankind can rest assured that their salvation is firmly founded on unchanging decrees and infallible promises.⁴⁸ Henry believes that in contradistinction to the deity of Plato, whose immutability implies powerlessness, the biblical immutable God, who created the universe is active in its temporal process and history. Aware of the challenge of understanding the relationship of an

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 5:287.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

immutable God to his mutable creation, Henry presents this clarification:

To insist that ontological change is predicable only of the world, and not of God, in no way eclipses the fact that creation adds to the realm of reality and existence along with God a space-time universe created and continually preserved by him. Creation of the world in time did not involve a change in God; he had planned creation from eternity so that formation of the universe was not the product of an unwilling deity who suddenly became willing to create. Nor was the creation the result of new powers in God. Nor did creation involve new divine perfections; God is infinite and embraces the totality of all possible perfections⁴⁹

Having discussed the meaning of divine immutability, Henry proceeds to respond to the difficult questions emanating from the very doctrine of divine changelessness—viz., the scriptural testimony to God’s repentance and/or change of mind, and the place of prayer.⁵⁰ He begins by concurring that with the appearance of the biblical ascription of the Hebrew term *nāham* and Greek term *metanoēō/metanoia* to God, the orthodox theologian has no choice but try to understand God’s repentance in light of divine immutability.⁵¹

Henry rejects Louis Berkhof’s anthropopathic rendition of divine repentance and conclusion that relational change occurs not in God, but in man.⁵² He proceeds to harmonize Change and changelessness in God when he says:

Even divine “repentance” can be viewed as the temporal fulfillment of a possibility eternally present to God and foreknown and foreordained by him. The sequence in 1 Samuel 15: 11, 29, 35 is instructive. God’s rejection of Saul is depicted as divine repentance (vv. 11, 35). Yet God’s refusal to reinstate Saul, that is to repent or change his mind, is ascribed to unchanging divine purpose (v.29). Since God is free to “repent” or not, his action is never imprudent or

⁴⁹ Ibid., 5:292.

⁵⁰ Some of the biblical passages in which God is portrayed as changing his mind are, “and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it. (Jeremiah 18:10);” “Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened. (Exodus 32:14);” and “or their sake he remembered his covenant and out of his great love he relented. (Psalm 106:45).”

⁵¹ Ibid., 5:301.

⁵² Ibid., 5:303. See Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 59. Berkhof asserts, “And if Scripture speaks of his repenting, changing his intention, and altering his relation to sinners when they repent, we should remember that this is only an anthropopathic way of speaking. In reality the change is not in God, but in man and in man’s relationship to God.”

unjust. Moreover, God achieves his goal (Rom. 11:29) despite man's disobedience and hardness of heart.⁵³

What Henry is trying to say here is that although God is immutable, it has pleased him to allow ontological and ethical changes in human beings. However these changes (i.e., repentance and restoration) are based on unchangeable standard, which requires an unrepentant sinner to be punished, and a repentant one restored. This is also the rationale for this argument:

God correlates his "repentance" with the season for repentance (Rom. 2:4) that he mercifully allots to rebellious man (Rom. 2:4). He holds before us the fact that our opportunity for repentance is limited, and that God has provided even our temporally limited human opportunity at great personal sacrifice. Scripture does not say that God "repented" of his demand for moral atonement and godliness. God's immutability does not conflict with his life, freedom, love or wrath; indeed, his immutability confers awesome importance upon all his perfections.⁵⁴

Henry concludes that divine "repentance" should not be taken as metaphysical or ethical, but rather, as anthropomorphic response to his rational creatures in a way commensurate to the conditions established by his eternal wisdom.⁵⁵ In his discussion of the place of prayer in the sovereignty of God, John Hannah seems to arrive at a similar conclusion when he argues to the effect that far from being superfluous in light of divine sovereignty, prayer is useful as a means of worship demanded by God, an ordained means of sanctifying grace, effecting change to the believer, and a divinely ordained secondary cause for desired change in the mutable created order.⁵⁶

Closely related to divine immutability, in the table of divine perfections, is divine omnibenevolence.⁵⁷ Henry is categorical that:

The Bible nowhere views God's goodness as a supreme heavenly exemplification of, or divine conformity to, a perfection first discovered in man and the world and then projected upon divinity. . . . Scripture rejects in principle

⁵³ Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 5:303.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 5:304.

⁵⁶ John D. Hannah, "Prayer and the Sovereignty of God," in *Vital Theological Issues: Examining Enduring Issues of Theology*, ed. Roy B. Zuck, Vital Issues Series (Grand Rapids: Kregel Resources, 1994), 12, 14, 18.

⁵⁷ See, Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 6:251. Cf., Ronald H. Nash, *Faith and Reason: Searching for a Rational Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 181.

Plato's view of a transcendent highest good that is normative even for the Demiurge who fashioned heaven and earth, as well as Aristotle's identification of the good as the goal of all human relationships and actions.⁵⁸

The following factors are constitutive of divine omnibenevolence: justice, as demonstrated by his redemption of the saints and condemnation of the sinners, and love, as demonstrated by his providential care of the nation of Israel.⁵⁹

C. Divine Degrees and Eternal Security of the Believer

The process of salvation begins with predestination, which is exclusively a divine sovereign prerogative. This is what Henry is trying to communicate, when he states, "The God of the Bible is still the predestinating and electing God who eternally decrees his purpose."⁶⁰ Predestination involves two cardinal truths. Being teleologically doxological—viz., with its goal as glory to God, predestination operates per divine pleasure/will. Since predestination issues from divine excellencies it guarantees eternal security of the believer.⁶¹ It is Henry's conviction that humanity should be glad that the sovereign God, who owes salvation to no one predestined some for salvation on the basis of his immutable and perfect will, rather than on human merit, which is by nature imperfect and short of the glory of God.

An extensive word study of predestination and its cognates has been provided by Benjamin Warfield, who finds the concept expressed in *inter alia* Hebrew utilization of the term בְּחַרְ (:

בְּחַרְ (of Israel, Deut. Iv. 37, vii. 6, 7,x. 15, xiv. 2 Isa. Xli.8, 9; and of the future, Isa. xiv. 1, lxv. 9, 15, 20. . . ; of Jehovah's servant, xlii.1, xlix.7; of Jerusalem, Deut. xii. 14, 18, 26, xiv. 25, xv.20. . . ., Jos. ix. 27, I kings viii. 44, 48. . .) with its substantive בְּחִירָה (exclusively used of Jehovah's 'elect,' II Sam. xxi. 6, I Chron. xvi. 13, Ps. lxxxix. 4. . . and occasionally the word יָצַע in a pregnant sense (Gen. xviii.19, Amos iii.2, Hos. xiii.5. . .); while it is rather the execution

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 6:252.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 6:98.

⁶¹ Ibid.

of this previous choice in an act of separation that is expressed by הַבְּדִיל (Lev. xx. 24, xx. 26, I Kings viii. 53).⁶²

Warfield continues to make the following observations from the New Testament Greek:

(T)he precise term *προορίζω* (. . . Rom. viii. 29, 30, Eph. i. 5, 11) is supplemented by a number of similar compounds, such as *προτάσσω* (Acts xvii.26; *προτίθημι* (Eph. i. 9); with its more frequently occurring substantive, *πρόθεσις* (. . .Eph. i.11, iii.11. . .); *προετοιμάζω* (Rom. ix. 23. . .) and perhaps *προβλέτω* in a similar sense of pre-arrangement (Heb. xi. 40), with which may be compared also *προεἶδον* (Act. ii. 31. . .); *προγιγνώσκω* (Rom. viii. 29, xi. 2, . . .) and its substantive *πρόγνωσις* (I Pet. i. 2. . .); *προχειρίζω* (Act. xxii. 14. . .) and *προχειροτονέω* (Acts iv.41).⁶³

The Protestant Reformers, in their bid to appreciate the doctrine of predestination struggled with the question as to whether the divine decree to elect some for salvation preceded or followed Adamic sin and fall. This attempt to understand election in relationship to creation and fall yielded three major schools of election, viz., Supralapsarianism, infralapsarianism, and Amyraldianism, according to Henry,⁶⁴ and Supralapsarianism, infralapsarianism, and sublapsarianism, according to Erickson.⁶⁵

⁶² Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *Biblical Doctrines*, The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1932; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2003), 6.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*. Henry explicates these schools and their exponents in this manner: Supralapsarianism (Beza), (1) (the decree) to elect some and consign others to perdition, (2) (the decree) to create both, (3) (the decree) to permit the fall, (4) (the decree) to justify the elect and condemn the non-elect; Infralapsarianism (Calvin), (1) (the decree) to create, (2) (the decree) to permit the fall by self-determination, (3) (the decree) to elect some, (4) (the decree) to bypass the others in their self-determinism; and Amyraldianism (Amyraut), (1) (the decree) to create, (2), (the decree) to permit the fall by self-determination, (3) (the decree) to provide salvation for all, (4) (the decree) to apply salvation to some (6:88). Henry, however, pays more attention to the first two of the mentioned schools. This is so because his interest is to expose Barth's heterodox rejection of any idea of the eternal fixity of predestination "on the ground that God himself is then temporally bound to it and that individuals cannot alter it" (*ibid.*, 6:95).

⁶⁵ In his work, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2006), Millard J. Erickson summarizes these three schools in the following manner: Supralapsarianism, (1) the decree to save (elect) some and reprobate others, (2) the decree to create both the elect and reprobate, (3) the decree to permit the fall of both the elect and reprobate, (4) the decree to provide salvation only for the elect; Infralapsarianism (1) the decree to create human beings, (2) the decree to permit the fall, (3) the decree to elect some and reprobate others, (4) the decree to provide salvation only for the elect; and Sublapsarianism, (1) the decree to create human beings, (2) the decree to permit the fall, (3) the decree to provide salvation sufficient for all, (4) the decree to save some and reprobate others (842–43).

Ephesians 1:4-6, “He hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, To the praise of the glory of his grace,” appears more supportive of supralapsarianism than of the other competing views, owing to its recognition of the priority of election to creation. However, we may concur with Henry in his assertion, “Whatever their differences over predestination, all Christians relate divine election one way or another to the mediatorial work of Jesus Christ; divine election is fulfilled in him and through him. . . . Predestination has no biblical meaning unless it refers to the Mediator and his mediation by way of inclusion or exclusion.”⁶⁶

II. God’s Glory as the Teleological Ground of Salvation

It may help to borrow a leaf here from Henry’s voluntarist theology. For Henry, God freely chose to create the universe for *inter alia*, divine disclosure. Henry shares his view that creation was teleologically revelatory in this statement:

God determines not only the *if* and *why* of divine disclosure, but also the *when*, *where*, *what*, *how*, and *who*. If there is to be a general revelation—a revelation universally given in nature, in history, and in the reason and conscience of every man—then that is God’s decision. If there is to be a special or particular revelation, that, too, is God’s decision and his alone. Only because God so wills it is there a cosmic-anthropological revelation. It is solely because of divine determination, Paul reminds us, that “that which may be known of God is manifest . . . for God hath shewed it . . . For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead. (Rom. 1:19-20, KJV) It is solely by God’s own determination that he reveals himself universally in the history of the nations and in the ordinary course of human events. He is nowhere without a witness (Acts 14:17) and is everywhere active either in grace or judgment.⁶⁷

Hence, the purpose of creation is to reveal the divine author of creation. This is the rationale of general revelation. Henry, contra Barth, does not render acceptance of general revelation tantamount to acceptance of natural theology. The immediate purpose of general

⁶⁶ Ibid., 6:100.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 2: 9-10.

revelation is epistemological, rather than soteriological.⁶⁸ While revelation juxtaposes the epistemological and soteriological motifs, as found in this passage, “How then shall they call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent?” (NAS, Rom. 10:14-15), knowledge and salvation are both means to the doxological end.

Our doxological concept is derived from the Hebrew word *kābôd*, which has been translated *doxa* in Greek and glory, in English through its Latin root, *gloria*.⁶⁹ From Harrison we gather that *kābôd* and *doxa* carry the notion of “reputation or honor,” and that in reference to God, they denote his intrinsic worth, ineffability, majesty, and perfection.⁷⁰ The proper emotive effect of the invocation of God’s glory is worship.

The doxological purpose of creation is clearly evident in Paul’s prologue to the Epistle to the Romans, which reads, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (NAS Rom. 1:18). The verb used here for “suppress” is *κατεχόντων*, an active participle of the verb *κατεχω*, which has as wide a range of meaning as “holding fast, holding back and holding in prison,” among others.⁷¹ The Pauline usage here has the force of willful restraining, produced by the combination of the verb and its qualifying dative instrumental *ἐν ἀδικίᾳ* in (with) *unrighteousness*⁷². The fact that the ungodly suppress the truth implies their volitional, rather than their noetic ignorance. The implied knowledge about God, by the unrighteous, is rendered explicit in verse 19, when Paul asserts, “(B)ecause that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.” Paul continues to build his argument in verse 20, which starts with a causal clause, beginning with a post-

⁶⁸ Ibid., 1:399. General revelation (creation) is supposed to divert attention from itself, and to its creator. In other words, God did not create the universe so that He could save mankind. God created the universe rather, for the purpose of glorifying himself.

⁶⁹ Everett F. Harrison, “Glory,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (2001), 484.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Hermann Hanse, “*Κατεχώ*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, (1999), 829.

⁷² Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 103.

positive causal γάρ⁷³ “for”, giving the reason why the unrighteous are not unaware of God. “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse” (NAS, Rom. 1:20).⁷⁴

In our estimation, the climax of this prologue is verse 21 where the Apostle Paul laments mankind’s failure to recognize this doxological end with these words, “For even though they knew God οὐχ ὡς θεὸν ἐδόξασαν ἢ ἠὲ χαρίστησαν, *they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks* (NAS, Rom. 1:21a). While this passage, together with that of Psalm 19:1-2ff., “The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night reveals knowledge,” are recognized as the key biblical support for general revelation, their doxological motif is usually missed.

The purpose of creation is epistemological. That is to say that God created in order to reveal himself to his creation. The purpose of revelation is doxological. That is to say God revealed himself so that his moral creatures—viz., angelic and human beings may worship and glorify him. A voluntarist theology will reject the tendency to juxtapose worship to soteriology, rather than doxology. While salvation is reserved for some, no one (elect or nonelect) has any excuse for not worshipping God. Peter T. O’Brien seems to concur on this universal doxological requirement in his commentary on Philippians 2:10–11. He warns against drawing a dichotomy between the lordship over the church and the lordship over the cosmos.⁷⁵ For O’Brien universal submission is required ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ (in honor of the name of Jesus). O’Brien observes:

The phrase ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι is not a technical term of invocation here. . . . (A)t Phil. 2:10 the whole cosmos is in view (πᾶν γόνυ, “every knee”), including those ‘in heaven, on earth, and in the under-world’ (ἐπουρανίων καὶ ἐπιγείων

⁷³ See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 674 for a helpful discussion on causal conjunctions.

⁷⁴ See Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 3:414, where Scripture is seen as primarily focusing of human cognitive faculties.

⁷⁵ Peter T. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary, ed. Howard Marshall and W. Ward Gasque (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 239.

καὶ καταχθονίων), and these are not depicted as invoking that name which Jesus has. Nor is the prepositional phrase to be weakened (with the ἐν being regarded as instrumental, meaning through or by) as though the name of Jesus is the means by which worship is directed to the Father. Rather, the adoration is in honour of the exalted Christ. . . and the parallel words of v.11b describe explicitly the act of reverence as paid directly to the Son and to the glory of God the Father.⁷⁶

God’s glory is something that he cannot compromise. Henry concurs on the centrality of God’s glory in creation when he observes:

The sustaining impression given by the account is that the living God creates voluntarily according to his sovereign pleasure—that is, he creates first and foremost for his own glory. . . . Nowhere does the creation account suggest that God was externally motivated or prompted to create, or that he was internally required to do so. The universe is a wholly contingent reality, not a product of divine necessity. Divine creation is not motivated by some inner divine need or lack.⁷⁷

God responded to mankind’s failure to proceed from their observation of nature to true worship and glorification of God, by graciously availing salvation to them. The result of salvation is the true worship of God. True worship of God brings glory and honor to him, which is the purpose for which he created everything.

Conclusion

Divine attributes are not a threat to human salvation. They are the very ground of salvation that cannot be lost. Were salvation meritorious—viz., based on the merit of the believer, it would be revocable, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Salvation must be understood, rather, in the context of gracious election based on the discussed divine excellencies (attributes of God), “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by

⁷⁶ 239-40. Cf. Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, ed. F. F. Bruce Ned B. Stonehouse, and Gordon D. Fee, *New International Commentary to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995) for a similar view of the doxological, rather than soteriological centrality of worship. Fee argues to the effect that Paul’s substitution of ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ for Isaiah’s יְהוָה ‘to me/before me’ in reference to Yahweh (Isa. 45:23) is based on his understanding that “through Christ’s resurrection and his ascension God (the Father) has transferred this right to obedience to the Son; he is the Lord to whom every knee shall eventually bow. There is in this language no hint that those who bow are acknowledging his salvation; on the contrary they *will* bow to his sovereignty at the End, even if they are not now yielding to it” (224).

⁷⁷ *Henry, God, Revelation and Authority*, 6:111.

works, so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:8, 9). Then, and only then can our salvation be said to be irrevocable.

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