

CALVINISM AND PROBLEMATIC READINGS OF NEW TESTAMENT TEXTS



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Introduction

Theological determinism affirms that everything that happens does so because God has ordained it to happen that way.¹ Augustine introduced this concept into Christian theology, though theological determinism is more commonly identified with John Calvin and the tradition of Reformed theology that he initiated.² For many, Calvinism is associated primarily with the doctrines of election and perseverance. However, it also affirms a theology of specific sovereignty (i.e., everything that happens does so because God has choreographed it to happen that way). As Robert Peterson and Michael Williams put it, God ordains everything down to “the trajectory of

¹In the words of the Westminster Confession (1646), “God from all eternity did by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so as thereby neither is God the author of sin; nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established” (III.1). If everything that happens does so because God has ordained it, then it follows that not only has God ordained the eternal suffering of most of those he created, but in the present world God has, through the mechanics of second causes, choreographed down to the smallest detail every murder, every rape, every genocide, every act of child abuse, every famine, every serial killing, every instance of child prostitution, every terrorist atrocity, every expression of racism, every addiction, and every sin.

²Cf. Robert Peterson and Michael Williams, *Why I Am Not An Arminian* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 141. John Feinberg, “God Ordains All Things,” in *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views on Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom*, ed. David Basinger, and Randall Basinger, 19-43 (Downers Grove: IVP, 1986); Paul Helm, “Classical Calvinist Doctrine of God,” in *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God: Four Views*, ed. Bruce Ware, 5-52 (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008); and Bruce Ware, “A Modified Calvinist Doctrine of God,” in *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God: Four Views*, ed. Bruce Ware, 76-120 (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008).

the smallest raindrop.”³ Calvinism must deny that people have any free will (libertarian freedom), for that would mean choices could be made that run counter to what God has ordained for them at every moment. Instead, Calvinists work with the concept of compatibilistic freedom, meaning that people willingly always make the choices that God ordains they will make.

Many lay Calvinists prefer to say that God permits evil rather than ordains it. They prefer to say that while God intentionally wills what is good, He reluctantly permits many evils.⁴ However, mainstream Calvinist theologians do not hold this view, and Calvin himself was critical of those who used this language: “How foolish and frail is the support of divine justice afforded by the suggestion that evils come to be, not by His will but by His permission. . . . It is a quite frivolous refuge to say that God indirectly permits them, when Scripture shows Him not only willing, but the author of them. . . . It is quite clear from the evidence of Scripture that God works in the hearts of men to incline their wills just as He will, whether to good . . . or to evil.”⁵

Calvinist theologians and New Testament scholars commonly develop their theology in relation to those texts that speak to the issues of salvation and perseverance. They rarely discuss the implication of a deterministic theological framework for the interpretation of a wide range of other kinds of New Testament texts. This paper will explore the implications of theological determinism for reading these texts.⁶

³Peterson and Williams, *Not An Arminian*, 141. As expressed by the Westminster Confession, Calvinists do not believe that God is the immediate cause of sin and evil but argue that God works through “second causes” to ordain sin and evil. Thus, for example, if God wants someone to become a serial killer, He will bring influences to bear on the person so that he or she willingly and without any direct coercive prompting from God will become a serial killer.

⁴Some Calvinist theologians do use the language of “permission” as a way of saying that God works through second causes when he scripts evil events. However they still believe that God intentionally wills that these evils occur and it is not a matter of reluctant permission.

⁵John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God* [1552], trans. J. K. S. Reid (Louisville: WJK, 1961), 176-7. A theological axiom undergirding Calvinist theology is that God’s grace is always irresistible. This has a much broader application than the irresistible character of grace with respect to salvation and perseverance. It applies to every moment of the life of every person—believer and unbeliever. Many lay Christians who identify themselves as Calvinists appear to be “cafeteria Calvinists,” believing that the grace that enables salvation and perseverance is irresistible, while in the daily outworking of the Christian life they have some degree of free will. However, no Calvinist theologians take this view.

⁶For excellent critiques of Calvinist theology see: Roger Olson, *Against Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011); Jerry Walls and Joseph Dongell, *Why I Am Not A Calvinist* (Downers Grove/Leicester: IVP Press, 2004); David L. Allen and Steve W. Lemke, *Whosoever Will: A Biblical-Theological Critique of Five-Point Calvinism* (Nashville: B& H Publishing Group, 2010). Cf. Roger Olson, ‘The Classical Free Will Theist Model of God’ in *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God*, 148-172, for an excellent summary of a theological framework that affirms libertarian freedom. As Olson points out, Arminian-Wesleyans do not believe that we have ‘absolute’ free will in that there are a range of forces that shape and influence our will: e.g. our sinful humanity; culture and our personal biography; the work of God in a person’s life (151).

Moral Exhortations in the New Testament

Every text in the New Testament contains a wealth of moral exhortations as to how God's people are to live, for example: remain committed to their marriages (e.g., Matt. 5:31-32); forgive those who wrong them (e.g., Matt. 6:14-15); be other focused rather than self centered (e.g., Phil. 2:1-4); love and care for their wives (e.g., Eph. 5:25-33); live worthy of the Gospel (e.g., Phil 1:27); resist sin (e.g., Rom. 6:12). These moral exhortations are comprehensible on the assumption that God has gifted his people with libertarian freedom and has extended the grace which will enable them to obey. God's people are challenged to respond to God's grace by daily striving to live obediently.

If these exhortations are read within the framework of theological determinism, then the implication is that the extent of the believer's obedience is determined by what God has ordained for them at any moment, not by the person in his or her exercise of the gift-of-grace-empowered libertarian freedom. Since God's grace is always irresistible, Christians sin ultimately because God withheld the grace that would have enabled obedience.⁷ When Christians divorce, refuse to forgive, are self-centered, give into temptation, bring shame on the gospel, or abuse their loved ones, the explanation must be that God has withheld the grace that would enable obedience to the moral exhortations of Scripture because He wanted them to commit these sins.⁸

The positive function of moral exhortations is to show believers what obedience will look like when God ordains their obedience. When God withholds the grace that would enable obedience, the moral exhortations function as an indictment of the behavior that God ordains. The necessary implication is that God exhorts believers to obedience while simultaneously withholding the grace that would enable obedience in those situations where Christian obedience would result in outcomes that run counter to what God wants. Or, to put it another way, if Christian obedience resulted in an outcome that God did not ordain, e.g., that a marriage remain intact, then God

⁷Terrance Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 230-58, makes a distinction between "sufficient grace" and "effective grace." When applied to God's work in the life of the believer, effective grace is for when obedience is the desired outcome. When God ordains that believers sin, he extends sufficient grace so that the believers can be held accountable for their disobedience. However, if God intentionally withholds the grace that would enable obedience so to render the sin certain, it is problematic to call this sufficient grace.

⁸To take another set of examples, when Christians grieve the Spirit (Eph 4:30), lack moral discernment (Phil. 1:10; Rom. 12:2), succumb to sexual sin (1 Thess. 4:3), choose evil rather than good (1 Thess. 5:21-22), fail to share with those in need (Rom. 12:13), are untruthful (Matt. 5:33-37), are gripped with fear and anxiety (Matt. 6:25-34), are judgmental (Matt. 7:1-5), are unfaithful in prayer (Rom. 12:12), are hearers but not doers of Jesus' teaching (Matt. 7:21-23), are found to deny their faith when persecuted (Matt. 10:16-20), are catalysts for dividing and destroying the church (1Cor. 10:10-17), or are causes of other believers to sin (Matt. 18:6-7), they do so ultimately because God withheld the grace that would have enabled obedience.

would withhold the grace that would enable obedience, with the result that in this example He would render the divorce certain. These conclusions are necessary deductions from the Calvinist view that God ordains everything that happens and that God's grace is always irresistible. As Williams and Peterson put it, "God sovereignly directs and ordains . . . our sinful acts as well as the good that we do."⁹

God's Purposes for the Believer

Closely related to the previous point is that God frequently expresses his purposes and goals for believers in the New Testament. They are to: bring God glory (Eph. 1:12); do good works (Eph 2:9); do what pleases God (Phil. 2:13); be holy (1 Thess. 4:3-7); love God and others (Luke 10:27); and be conformed to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29). Theological determinism requires that the extent to which these purposes are realized in the life of individual believers and churches is determined entirely by God, not by the person in his or her exercise of the gift-of-grace-empowered libertarian freedom. God is the one who determines the extent to which believers bring glory to God or do good works. When believers fail to love God and others it is because God has withheld the grace that would enable love. God is the one who determines the specific path for each person with respect to his or her progress in the Christian life and being "conformed to the image of Christ." The disparity between Christians who lack spiritual development and those who demonstrate significant growth can only be explained in terms of what God has ordained for each person with respect to his or her progress in the Christian life.

God's Daily Work in the Life of the Believer

To come at this from another angle, there are a number of statements in the New Testament that directly focus on God's ongoing work in the life of the believer: enabling the Philippians to be partners with Paul in the spread of the Gospel (Phil. 1:6), empowering believers to live righteous lives (Phil. 1:11), and enabling them both to will and do what pleases Him (Phil. 2:13). This language makes sense on the assumption of grace-enabled libertarian freedom. God is at work to empower the believer to break free from the conditioning of the flesh (their fallen humanity) so that they have the ability to desire what is right and then to do it. To put it in contemporary terms, God grants the believer the gift-of-grace-empowered libertarian freedom. The moral exhortations that occur in the context of these affirmations encourage the believer to embrace and live out the gift-of-grace-empowered libertarian freedom each day.

The problem with interpreting these statements within the framework of compatibilistic freedom is: How does one explain disobedient believers? The failure cannot be traced to the misuse of libertarian freedom. The problem must be that when believers sin, they do so because God did not extend sufficient grace "to enable them to will and do what pleases God."

⁹Peterson and Williams, *Not an Arminian*, 161. To restate an earlier point, this is a mainstream Calvinist position, not some extreme hyper-Calvinism.

To take a specific Pauline example, in 1 Cor. 10:13 Paul tells the Corinthians that when tempted—in this context to attend temple meals—God will provide the grace that will enable them to resist temptation (in other words, a way out). This makes sense with the assumption of libertarian freedom, i.e. grace is not irresistible and therefore believers must exercise their grace-enabled libertarian freedom to take the way out. It makes less sense with the assumption of compatibilistic freedom. If God always extends the grace to resist the temptation to sin, then why do some Christians fail to embrace that grace and resist temptation? The Calvinist answer must be that God ordained that the person succumb to temptation and attend temple meals. In these circumstances, God extends to some the grace that will provide a way out of temptation, while He simultaneously extends to the others the grace that will not provide a way out of temptation.

One way a theological determinist might rationalize this would be to argue that when tempted some Christians receive “general grace” while others receive “effectual grace.” General grace is for when God ordains that believers do not resist temptation and fall into sin, and effectual grace is when God ordains that believers resist temptation and do not sin.¹⁰

Critiques of the Sins of Believers

In many New Testament texts, churches are rebuked for embracing sin and erroneous theological and ethical perspectives. The Corinthian epistles provide a glimpse into a church that had embraced a remarkable concentration of problematic positions: they wanted to marginalize the message of the Cross (1 Cor. 1:18); tried a variety of strategies to demonize Paul (e.g., 2 Cor. 10); argued that there was no ethical objection to using prostitutes (1 Cor. 6:12-20); concluded that sex between believers was inappropriate (1 Cor. 7); advocated attending meals at pagan temples where drunkenness and sex with prostitutes was the norm (1 Cor. 8, 10:1-22); used tongues as a means of self-promotion (1 Cor. 12-14); allowed the Lord’s Supper to be an occasion for overeating and getting drunk (1 Cor 11:17-33); and defined Christian leadership using Greco-Roman cultural values such as rhetorical ability, a strong physical appearance, the ability to avoid suffering, and a willingness to engage in patronage relationships (2 Cor 10-13). In response to these and other problems Paul labored strenuously to try to correct their flawed perspectives. If Paul were a theological determinist, then he believed that God (1) choreographed each of these sins in the Corinthian church, (2) ordained all the specifics of Paul’s response, (3) determined how the Corinthian church would respond to Paul’s appeals.¹¹

¹⁰As Calvinists will recognize, this is a play on the Calvinist distinction between a “general call” and “effectual call.” When the gospel is preached, those whom God has predestined to damnation hear it only as a general call, while the elect hear it as an effectual call, i.e. God enables the elect to respond. My tongue-in-cheek proposal actually corresponds to Tiessen’s distinction between sufficient grace and effectual grace (cf. note 7).

¹¹Ezekiel 24:13–16 provides an illuminating O.T. parallel: “You mix uncleanness with obscene conduct. I tried to cleanse you, but you are not clean. You will not be cleansed from your uncleanness until I have exhausted my anger on you.” With a Calvinist reading, God simultaneously tried to cleanse Israel and prevented them from being cleansed because he wanted to judge them. Cf. Jeremiah 7:12-14.

In Revelation 2-3 Jesus dictates letters to seven churches in Asia Minor. For each church, the letters blend commendation and/or censure. Where circumstances require words of censure an opportunity is given for repentance. Finally, promises of eschatological salvation and/or judgment are given depending on how believers respond to Jesus' words. If these letters are read within the framework of theological determinism, Jesus dictates these letters with full awareness that God has ordained (1) the precise pattern of obedience and disobedience in each church, (2) the specifics of the sins of each church, (3) to what extent each church will respond to his call to repentance and change. In the case of Revelation 3:20, for example, Jesus knows that the Father has ordained both that the church shut Jesus out and that He would plead with the church for a restoration of relationship. He also knows that God, not the church, is the one who determines whether or not the church will respond to Jesus' call to be invited into their midst.

James 4:2-3 states that there are times when believers do not receive from God either because they fail to pray and/or because their prayers are self-seeking and self-indulgent. A Calvinist understanding must conclude that God Himself ordained the failure to pray and/or the self-indulgent focus of prayers.

Warnings to Believers

Related to the above point are the frequent warnings in the New Testament about embracing erroneous teaching. Jesus warns about false prophets (e.g., Matt. 7:15-20), Paul warns the Philippian church about the dangers of both Judaizers and libertines (Phil. 3:2-21), and the Colossian church about a theology that is somewhat difficult to reconstruct precisely (Col. 2:16-23). In his letter to the Galatians he rebukes Christians for embracing a Judaizing theology, and in the Johannine epistles, John rebukes those who embrace a theology that again is difficult to reconstruct precisely. When read within the framework of theological determinism, the conclusion is that God choreographed all the details of these heretical theologies as well as the extent to which believers would resist or embrace false teaching or realign themselves with truth when they stumbled.

In Rev. 14:9-13 believers are warned not to compromise when persecuted. Those who fail to heed this warning and deny their faith will come under eschatological judgment, while those who remain faithful to the point of death will "rest from their labor" (i.e. will experience eschatological salvation). Elsewhere Revelation explicitly states that God extends the grace that will enable believers to remain faithful in a tribulation context (e.g., Rev. 7:1-8; 11:1-2). Revelation 14:9-13 assumes that believers can exercise their grace-empowered libertarian freedom by choosing either to defend their faith or to deny it. However, based on Calvinist assumptions, God is the one who decided "before the foundation of the world" how each believer would choose.

Well-Intentioned Differences among Christians

The New Testament contains a number of texts which acknowledge that Christians differ among themselves on various issues. In Rom. 14:1-15:4 Paul instructs Christians how to handle those situations in which Christians differ on issues that Paul believes lack intrinsic moral significance (the strong and the weak). Acts reflects differences of opinion about the Gentile mission and the conditions for acceptance of Gentiles as believers (Acts 15). Galatians 2:11-13 describes a situation in which Paul strongly disagrees with Peter and Barnabas. The Jerusalem Council stipulates that Gentile Christians are not to eat marketplace meat which originated in pagan sacrifices (Acts 15), but about six or seven years later Paul says that this meat can be eaten by any Christian (1 Cor. 11:23-33). In Phil. 3:15 Paul acknowledges that Christians will have different perspectives on some issues. He develops a strong theological argument for women wearing head coverings in public worship but acknowledges that not all will agree with him (1 Cor. 11:2-16). Theological determinism claims that God has ordained all these differences of opinions as well as the specifics of whether Christians will handle their differences well or poorly.¹²

Statements about the Christian Life

In Rom. 5:3-4 Paul states that God uses adversity as a catalyst for the character development of a believer. The question is whether this statement is conditional on the believer's appropriate response to the difficult circumstance in order for it to be character building. Schreiner argues that ultimately it is not conditional because God will always overcome the believer's temptation to respond poorly to adversity.¹³ The unstated assumption is that believers respond poorly to suffering, which ultimately results in a negative impact on their personal and spiritual formation, because God has ordained the situation. The character building function of adversity is now conditioned not upon how the person responds but on what God ordains for the person in any particular experience of adversity.

Paul understands that the Christian life is one in which there is a tension between what God wants for us and desires rooted in our fallen humanity.¹⁴ In Rom. 7:14-25 Paul explores those times in the experience of the believer when 'the flesh' rather than 'the Spirit' wins. There are

¹²Down through the centuries Christians have differed on countless points of theology and biblical interpretation. Theological determinism assumes that God ordained each and every concept, no matter how outrageous, erroneous and destructive. Furthermore God ordained all the conflicts and divisions within the church that resulted from these differences. When New Testament scholars defend a wide range of interpretive options on a given text, a Calvinist must assume that God ordained each of these interpretive positions and it is possible that none of them are correct. We can, thus, never be sure whether God has determined that we arrive at an erroneous or correct understanding of a text. It is impossible to reconcile this conclusion with Paul's affirmation that "God is not a God of disorder but of peace" (1 Cor. 14:33, the context being a statement about worship).

¹³Schreiner, *Romans*, 256.

¹⁴E.g., the conflict between the flesh and Spirit in Gal. 5:16-17.

times when believers wants to do what is right but instead do what they know is wrong. On the assumption of libertarian freedom, Paul is saying that in spite of God's grace, which is at work to enable him "to will and to do" what pleases God, Paul occasionally chooses wrongly and sins. The failure lies with Paul's exercise of his grace-empowered libertarian freedom. On the assumption of compatibilistic freedom, Paul is saying that there are times when God extends sufficient grace, which enables Paul to desire to do the right thing, but not enough grace that would enable him to carry out this intention and as a result Paul chooses wrongly and sins. On this assumption the problem ultimately is that God withheld the grace that would have enabled Paul to translate God's ordained intentions into actions, which God did not ordain for those circumstances. Or, to put it another way, God extends the general grace, which enables the believer "to will to do the good," but withholds the effectual grace, which would enable the person "to do what pleases God."

In Rom. 5:10-17, Paul says that the Spirit bears witness to our spirit that we are sons and daughters of God. Some believers have a deep and consistent experience of this witness of the Spirit. Other believers, however, have no experiential sense of being loved and accepted by God. Some experience deep anguish and torment from this lack. On the deterministic assumptions, God is the one who ordains what will be true for each believer.

In 1 Cor. 3:10-17, Paul differentiates three ways that Christians can contribute to shaping the church: (1) a constructive one ('building with gold and silver'); (2) an anemic one ('building with wood and hay'); (3) a destructive one ('if anyone destroys God's Temple'). When read within the framework of theological determinism, the passage portrays God as determining what will be true for any given individual.

In Matt. 18:16-17, Jesus speaks to a situation in which a disciple, when confronted, refuses to repent of his sin. On a Calvinist reading, God is the one who ordains that he or she is unresponsive to discipline.

Jesus states that God is responsive to the prayers of his people (e.g., Luke 11:5-13; 18:1-8). On the assumption of theological determinism, this could only be true if God choreographed the specifics of believers' prayers so that they petitioned precisely what God had already determined would happen. God would "respond" in the sense that there was a one-to-one correlation between what was prayed and what transpired. Once again this is counterintuitive because this is not how people understand God's responsiveness to prayer today or in biblical Judaism, and there is no contextual evidence that this is how Jesus meant his words to be understood.¹⁵

A number of New Testament texts promise "rewards" or "blessings" for faithful discipleship and service (e.g., Matt. 6:4; 6, 18; 10:41-42; Lk. 6:35; 1 Cor. 3:8; 4:5; Gal. 6:19). The intent of

¹⁵Cf. David Crump, *Knocking on Heaven's Door: A New Testament Theology of Petitionary Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 129-30, 289-91. Crump critiques the Calvinist reading of petitionary prayer along similar lines. This is especially remarkable because he is Professor of Theology and Religion at Calvin Seminary.

these statements is to motivate believers to use their grace-empowered libertarian freedom in faithful discipleship. This is expressed broadly in 2 Cor. 5:10 when Paul says that each believer will stand before Christ and give an accounting of his or her discipleship. All persons will “receive what is due them for the things done . . . whether good or evil.” With Calvinist assumptions, God has determined before the foundation of the world what will be true for each believer with respect to the quality of his or her discipleship; therefore, He has determined the “rewards” or “rebukes” he or she will receive. God then uses these promises of reward as a catalyst for motivating obedience in those believers whom He wants to bless. When God ordains that some believers will receive eschatological rebukes, the promises will not be a catalyst for motivating obedience and therefore the believer will receive their God-ordained rebuke.¹⁶

Other New Testament Texts

The Matthean version of the Lord’s Prayer has the petition “your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). The assumption behind the statement would appear to be that in the present age God’s will is not fully realized on earth in the same way that it is in heaven. This would appear to contradict the Calvinist assumption whatever happens in this age is because God has ordained it; therefore, his will is always done “on earth as it is in heaven.”¹⁷

If Jesus worked with a deterministic theology, then when He critiqued the failures of the Pharisees He would have done so with the realization that God ordained each of these sins (e.g., Matt 23:1-36). The same would be true of his words of judgment spoken to unresponsive Galilean villagers (e.g., Matt. 11:20-24). After exploring options for understanding the reasons for Israel’s unbelief, Paul concludes in Rom. 10:23 that the real problem is stubborn disobedience in spite of having God continuously “holding out his hand” to Israel. A Calvinist reading of this requires that God Himself ordains the stubborn disobedience. Therefore, He is “holding out his hand” to Israel while simultaneously withholding the grace that would enable them to respond.¹⁸

¹⁶For these promises of reward and rebuke to have a motivational function for most people, the hearer must read them with the assumption of libertarian freedom, i.e. it is within their power to make right or wrong choices that lead to these different outcomes. If Calvinists are right, then it seems to me that these statements are communicated necessarily within a misleading and even deceptive framework in order to be effective. I will restate this point in the concluding section.

¹⁷The Calvinist solution is to distinguish God’s revealed moral will and His secret ordaining will. The latter is always done on earth. Thus, the petition is a prayer that God’s revealed moral will would be done on earth.

¹⁸Schreiner, *Romans*, 520. Schreiner argues that in this text God simultaneously invites people into relationship while simultaneously withholding the grace that would enable them to respond.

The biblical concept of ‘divine grief’ is inexplicable in the face of theological determinism. The Gospels record Jesus’ grief over the unresponsiveness of Jerusalem and the people of God (e.g., Matt. 23:37-39). If Jesus were a theological determinist, then He believed that God Himself had ordained this unresponsiveness, but if God had choreographed this unbelief, why grieve over it?¹⁹

Human expressions of moral outrage (e.g., Gal. 1:6; 3:1) are also problematic with the assumption of theological determinism. Why be angry about realities which God has ordained? With Calvinist assumptions, when believers are distressed at evil in the world and church, God has ordained that they express moral outrage about realities that God Himself choreographed. God is also the one who decides whether an expression of moral outrage is a catalyst for correcting problems or an exercise in futility.

God’s Universal Salvific Will

The New Testament contains many affirmations that God desires the salvation of every person.²⁰ Calvinism argues God has an extraordinarily limited salvific will which embraces a small subset of humanity that is unconditionally selected for salvation. Calvinist interpreters use a variety of strategies to deal with the texts affirming God’s universal salvific will: (1) restricting “all” to “all the elect”; (2) defining “all” as “all kinds of people” from every sector of society; (3) interpreting the intention as salvation is not just for the Jew but also the Gentile. Each of these interpretations is counterintuitive and lacks contextual support. Schreiner recognizes this and concedes that texts such as 2 Peter 3:9 affirm that God *desires* the salvation of every person. However, he argues that while God does *desire* the salvation of all, He *ordains* to make salvation possible only for a limited number.²¹ In addition to being

¹⁹This is also a problem for reading the Old Testament texts that portray God’s grief and anger over the sins of Israel with profound intensity (e.g., Jer. 13:15-17; Isa. 1:10-15). If God has “morally sufficient reasons” to ordain the sins of His people, why would He grieve that they are doing precisely what He has scripted for them? Sanders, *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God*, 142. Sanders points out that Augustine and Calvin were consistent on this point and argued that God is never grieved.

²⁰Matt. 22:14; Luke 2:10; John 1:7, 9, 29, 36; 3:16; 4:42; 5:23; 6:45; 11:48; 12:32; Acts 17:30; 22:14; Romans 5:15-19; 10:11-13; 11:32; 2 Cor. 5:19; Phil. 2:11; Col. 2:20; 1 Tim. 2:4; Titus 2:11; 2 Pet. 3:9; 1 John 2:2; Rev. 22:17. Cf. I. Howard Marshall, “For all, for all my Saviour Died,” in *Semper Reformandum: Studies in Honour of Clark H. Pinnock*, ed. Stanley Porter and Anthony Cross, 322-46 (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003).

²¹Thomas Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude* NAC (Nashville: Broadman, 2003), 380-3. Cf. also Ware, *Divine Election*, 32-5. John Piper, “Are There Two Wills in God?,” in *Still Sovereign*, 107-13, has developed the fullest defense of this construct. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 381-382, acknowledges that “Many think this approach is double-talk and outright nonsense.” I would add that this interpretive approach is counterintuitive, contextually unsupported, and ahistorical because no evidence shows that this is how these statements would have been read in a first century context.

a counterintuitive way of reading the relevant texts, it raises the logical question of why God would desire one thing but ordain something else.²² To put it more starkly, why would God *desire* that all of humanity experience the glory of his presence for eternity but choose to *ordain* that the majority of people experience the horror of eternal separation? And, why in His self-revelation would He say that He desires that all be saved when He knows that He is going to ordain something completely different? And, where is the contextual evidence that this is how the Jesus, John, Paul, and Peter understood the affirmations of God's universal salvific will?

Seven Concluding Observations

First, there is a lack of historical and contextual evidence that would validate interpreting the New Testament within the framework of theological determinism. No evidence suggests that mainstream Second Temple Judaism embraced exhaustive theological determinism. If Jesus, Paul and other writers of the New Testament had a different view on this matter, then we would expect it to be clearly expressed. If they wanted to be understood correctly they would have wanted to distinguish their theological framework from the traditional Jewish construct of reality, which assumed libertarian freedom.²³ However, nothing in

²²John Piper argues that God ordains both the damnation of the majority of humanity as well as the evil and carnage so pervasive in human experience for the express purpose of magnifying His glory since these realities are necessary prerequisites for the elect to understand the depth of God's holiness, majesty, and glory. For a critique of this construct along with a response from Piper see Thomas McCall, "I Believe in Divine Sovereignty," *Trinity Journal* n.s. 29 (2008), 205-26; John Piper, "I Believe in God's Self-Sufficiency: A Response to Thomas McCall," *Trinity Journal* n.s. 29 (2008), 227-34; Thomas McCall, "We Believe in God's Sovereign Goodness: A Rejoinder to John Piper," *Trinity Journal* n.s. 29 (2008), 235-46.

²³The lack of evidence that either mainstream Second Temple Judaism or Jesus and the early church were theological determinists is an important consideration when considering Old Testament texts which Calvinists take as proof texts for theological determinism (e.g. Gen. 50:20; Exod. 8:15, 32; 9:12; 10:1; Deut. 32:39; Job 1:21; 2:10; Eccles. 7:14; Lam. 3:38; Prov. 16:9; 21:1; 1 Sam. 2:6-7; Isa. 45:7; Amos 3:6). If this was how the original authors intended their statements to be understood, then one would expect that this would be reflected in Second Temple Jewish literature or the New Testament. The lack of evidence for theological determinism in this literature suggests that neither Second Temple Jews or Jesus and the early church understood these Old Testament texts in the way that Calvinists propose. However, the real problem for using these texts as Scriptural evidence for theological determinism is that when viewed in the total context of the Old Testament, a Calvinist interpretive framework is contextually unsupported and results in counterintuitive and ahistorical readings of thousands of Old Testament texts and many different kinds of material (precisely the same problem as reading the New Testament within the framework of theological determinism). Crump, *Knocking on Heaven's Door*, 290-1, n. 16. Crump points out that Calvinist theologians ignore the meaning of the texts in their original context. For a historically and contextually based interpretation of these texts see F. Lindstrom, *God and the Origin of Evil: A Contextual Analysis of Alleged Monistic Evidence in the Old Testament* (Lund: Gleerup, 1983).

the context indicates that they departed from Jewish thinking on this point and embraced comprehensive theological determinism.²⁴

Christians in the early centuries would have been familiar with a deterministic world view in light of the pervasive impact of Stoic philosophy. I find it remarkable that no theologian, pastor, or scholar in the early church prior to Augustine found theological determinism in the New Testament.²⁵ This is not what one would expect if the New Testament contained significant contextual indicators that the writers conceptualized reality within a deterministic theological framework.

Second, as illustrated in the above reviews of New Testament texts, theological determinism conflicts with the natural, intuitive reading of so many passages. A good hypothesis is one that accounts for the largest amount of data with the fewest number of residual challenges. Reading the New Testament within the framework of theological determinism does not create the occasional tension that may require a somewhat counterintuitive interpretation of scattered texts. The challenges are monumental and a Calvinist reading requires counterintuitive and ahistorical interpretations of thousands of texts and many various kinds of material. Such a Calvinist reading, in the end, is an exercise in eisegesis on a grand scale that in turn generates an enormous amount of textual destruction. One must impose a deterministic theological framework on texts through the use of consistently counterintuitive and ahistorical interpretive strategies.²⁶

²⁴Romans 9:6-23 is the text most commonly cited by Calvinists to prove that Paul was a theological determinist. Statements like “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy” (9:15) and “he has mercy on whom he wishes and hardens whom he wishes” (9:18) sound like an expression of theological determinism. These statements must be read within the context of Paul’s entire argument in Romans 9-11. Paul is responding to the twin objections that if the promises to Israel were indeed realized in Jesus then (1) God was under obligation to ensure that the covenant people recognized and responded to this reality, and (2) it would be wrong for God to allow Gentiles to be the primary beneficiaries of the promises to Israel. In 9:6-23, Paul is arguing that God (1) has no obligation to turn up the heat of irresistible grace so that Israel will respond to what he does and as a result he is free to act in judgment towards Jews who spurn His grace; (2) is free to show mercy to responsive Gentiles—who were not the primary recipients of Scriptural promises. In response to the Jewish demand for preferential treatment, Paul wants to affirm God’s freedom in the exercise of His mercy and judgment. Romans 9-11 contains numerous statements which clearly demonstrate that Paul was not a theological determinist. Cf. Glen Shellrude, “The Freedom of God in Mercy and Judgment: A Libertarian Reading of Romans 9:6-29,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 81.4 (2009), 306-18.

²⁵Augustine would have been familiar with determinism from both Manichaeism and Stoicism. However, it appears that his determinism is rooted in the Platonic and Neoplatonic concept that an absolutely perfect being (God) must be ‘impassible or immutable,’ (i.e. could not experience any inward changes). Cf. John Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 2d ed. (Downers Grove: IVP, 2007), 149-53.

²⁶When reading online responses to books debating the Calvinist-Arminian issue (e.g., on Amazon.com), I often notice lay Calvinists pointing out that Arminians argue from a more philosophical perspective while Calvinists argue from Scripture and have the upper hand with respect to scriptural proof-texts. They

Third, with a Calvinist reading of Scripture, the motivational effectiveness of many scriptural statements is dependent on the reader being deceived. God's people are motivated to faithful service and discipleship with the promise of eschatological blessing when, in reality, God has already determined the precise experience of blessing and rebuke that will be true for each person. Believers are promised that God will enable them to resist temptation when, in reality, He has already determined that in many situations they will give in to temptation and sin. The warnings against apostasy motivate believers to persevere in their faith when, in reality, apostasy is a theoretical impossibility. God assures His people that He will enable them to be renewed in their thinking while simultaneously ordaining that they embrace a wide range of erroneous ideas. The promise is made that the Spirit will enable obedience when, in reality, God only intends that believers have very limited experiences of obedience. In these and many other instances, the effectiveness of scriptural affirmations is dependent on the reader being deceived (i.e. reading the passage with the assumption of libertarian freedom).

Fourth, we need to account for the chasm between what God says about His moral will for humanity and the way God actually choreographs human experience. God is opposed to evil and the champion of goodness and truth but writes a script for human history in which evil and carnage are the dominant realities. In order to account for this, Calvinists must distinguish between God's "revealed will" (aka "preceptive will") and His "secret/hidden or ordaining will" (also called "decretive will"). God's revealed will is the expression of His moral will for humanity, while His secret or ordaining will is what God ordains will be the experience of each person.

God has revealed that He is responsive to prayer, while in His secret will He ordains that only those petitions, which He ensures correlate with the script He wrote before creating the world, will appear to have been answered. God has revealed that believers should align themselves with truth, while simultaneously ordaining that believers embrace a wide range of erroneous thinking. God has revealed that believers are to be perfect as He is perfect, while simultaneously ordaining the precise expression and degree of sin that will characterize each believer. God has revealed that believers should not divorce their spouses, but in His secret will He has ordained that believers divorce their spouses with about the same frequency as in secular society. God has revealed that He cares about children, while simultaneously ordaining that vast numbers of children are abused, neglected, and sexually exploited. God has revealed that believers are to honor and delight Him, while ordaining that much of the time believers deeply grieve Him and bring shame on the gospel. God has revealed that He is uncompromisingly opposed to sin and evil, while in His ordaining will He has scripted a staggering level of sin and evil in human history.

conclude from this that Calvinism is the more scriptural theology. Calvinism, however, is deeply and profoundly contradicted by Scripture, because theological determinism requires the exegetical abuse of countless biblical texts. This point is not immediately apparent to most people for they do not reflect on the implications of consistent theological determinism for reading the kinds of biblical material discussed in this paper.

God's 'secret will' is fully knowable with respect to the present and past since all that happens corresponds precisely to what He has ordained. What cannot be known are the disparities between God's revealed will and His secret will as it relates to future events. One implication of this construct is that Christians are often simultaneously working on the side of God's revealed will but against God's secret will. Thus, for example, Christians who give themselves to working with the suffering children of the world can be assured that their goals are in complete alignment with God's revealed will. However, they could possibly be working against God's secret/ordaining will. If this is the case, then their work will bear little or no results. This is true for every aspect of Christian ministry. The result is a view of God which represents Him as having two distinct wills that are deeply conflicted and contradictory.

Fifth, Calvinists use language and concepts in ways which are unparalleled in human experience. They affirm that God loves each and every person while simultaneously ordaining that the majority of those He 'loves' will have no opportunity to avoid the horror of eternal separation. Calvinism affirms that God is pure holiness while simultaneously ordaining and rendering certain all the sins and evils in human experience. Calvinists claim that God holds people responsible for their choices even though every single choice has been choreographed by God and people can never do other than what God has ordained they do. This theology affirms that God is in no way responsible for sin and evil, even though He has structured reality and human experience in such a way that people willingly commit the sins God has ordained for them. Calvinism claims that God has choreographed all the evils and horrors that will characterize human experience for the purpose of enhancing His own glory. Each of these positions is logically and morally offensive as well as being without parallel in human experience. If human parents were to act with respect to their children in any way similar to how Calvinists claim God acts, then those parents would be declared moral monsters.²⁷

Edwin Palmer acknowledges the absurdity of what Calvinism affirms: "He [the Calvinist] realizes that what he advocates is ridiculous. . . . The Calvinist freely admits that his position is illogical, ridiculous, nonsensical and foolish." However, he argues that the scriptural evidence requires one to embrace this intrinsically absurd view of God.²⁸

If God has created us with a rational and moral discernment that to some extent mirrors his own, then the cluster of logical and moral absurdities inherent in the Calvinist system suggests that there is a problem with the theology itself. The appropriate response is not to celebrate absurdity, or as is more commonly done, to appeal to mystery but rather to rethink the theology in light of the totality of the scriptural evidence.

²⁷ Olson, *Against Calvinism*, develops and illustrates these ideas at many points, cf. especially pp. 166f; 175-79.

²⁸ Edwin Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 106.

Sixth, the Calvinist view of God is contradicted by God's self-revelation in Scripture. For example, God reveals an uncompromising opposition to sin and evil, but Calvinism argues that God has decreed every expression of sin and evil in human experience; God reveals a universal salvific will, but Calvinism affirms that God has an extraordinarily restrictive salvific will; God challenges His people to obedience on the assumption that they can make meaningful choices to be obedient, but Calvinism argues that God has ordained the choices believers will make in every situation.

Calvinists justify God's ordination of the monumental scale of evil and sin in human experience by arguing that God has "morally justified reasons" for acting in this way because some greater good, fully known only to God, is served by all the carnage. The difficulty with challenging this argument is the claim that "the reasons are known only to God." However, given the magnitude of sin and evil in human experience, if the Calvinist argument were true, then it should be obvious that in many cases these evils served some demonstrable good. Furthermore, since on Calvinist assumptions God can script history as He chooses, He could have accomplished the same good results with much less evil and ambiguity. In any case, it is easier to evaluate the argument with respect to the eternal destiny of men and women. What are the "morally justified reasons" for God's decision to prevent the vast majority of people from being able to respond to God because He has ordained that their destiny will be one of eternal torment? How can this reconcile with God's self-revelation, which is characterized by absolute love, mercy, and holiness? This is especially problematic for those Calvinists who claim that God desires the salvation of every person but chooses to ordain that the majority of humanity will experience the horror of eternal separation. Given the Calvinist denial of free will, nothing would prevent God from ordaining the salvation of all and working in each person so ultimately they respond to Him.

Because these things are part of our experience, many find it difficult to come to terms with the idea that God has choreographed all the evil and carnage that characterizes human experience (e.g., genocides, rapes, murders, abuse of children, etc.). However this suffering is completely inconsequential in comparison with the thought that God has ordained the damnation of the vast majority of the human race. Suffering in this world is for an infinitesimally short period of time when compared to eternal suffering. If one accepts that God has predestined the eternal damnation of most of those He created, it should be easy to accept that God has scripted all the evil we see in human experience. Cafeteria Calvinists, who stumble at the thought that God has scripted all the evil and sin in present human experience, need to ask themselves why they find it easier to accept that God has ordained the eternal suffering of the vast majority of humanity.

The scale of evil and carnage in the world truly is monumental. One might ask which worldview best accounts for this phenomenon: (1) atheism, (2) a deterministic theism, (3) a theistic perspective, which affirms the reality of libertarian freedom. I believe an atheistic view of reality is more plausible than theological determinism. With atheistic assumptions, the explanation might be that humans are the product of natural evolutionary forces, and what we choose to describe as evil are all part of the natural evolutionary process. With the assumptions

of theological determinism, God could just as easily have constructed a script for human history in which no evil is present or far less evil than is actually the case is present. However, with Calvinist assumptions, God intentionally chose to write a script with all the evil and carnage that we observe. It is impossible to reconcile this with God's self-revelation as one characterized by love, mercy, holiness and an uncompromising opposition to sin and evil. A theistic worldview constructed on the assumption that God has created men and women with genuine libertarian freedom provides a much more plausible account of reality because the explanation for a great deal of what is wrong with the world can be traced to the sinful abuse of the gift of libertarian freedom.²⁹ Calvinists like to claim that their theology serves to highlight the holiness and glory of God. In reality, Calvinism denigrates God's holiness and glory with its claim that God has choreographed every expression of sin and evil in human experience.³⁰

Seventh, theological determinism in effect denies the scriptural affirmation that God desires to be in relationship with the women and men He created. If one day we are able to actualize the science fiction notion of creating artificial intelligence, I find it difficult to imagine that people would find joy in relationships with those who are following their programming. I also find it impossible to imagine that the God who created men and women in order to have a relationship with them would find joy with those who were simply following their divine programming. Why would God find delight in human responses to His grace that were completely ordained by Him and not freely chosen? Are we to believe that God takes delight in expressions of love, worship, and praise that He has scripted?

What would we think of a novelist or playwright who restricted their relationships to mental ones with the characters they had created in literary works and movies? A good movie is one that creates tension and drama by conveying the impression that people are making real decisions, therefore the outcome is in doubt. But the storyline is an illusion, for every action and word

²⁹I realize that the affirmation of libertarian freedom does not explain everything and leaves plenty of room for "mystery."

³⁰In his sermon *Free Grace*, John Wesley said that Satan might as well take a permanent leave of absence since God does Satan's work far more effectively: "You, with all your principalities and powers, can only so assault that we may resist you; but He can irresistibly destroy both body and soul in hell! You can only entice; but His unchangeable decrees—to leave thousands of souls in death—compel them to continue in sin, till they drop into everlasting burnings. You tempt; He forces us to be damned; for we cannot resist His will. You fool, why do you go about any longer, seeking whom you may devour? Have you not heard that God is the devouring lion, the destroyer of souls, the murderer of men?" Found at <http://new.gbgbm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/128/> (I have modernized the language). In reality the God of Calvinism requires Satan to stay on the job in order "to keep his hands clean." God choreographs evil and sin in human experience through "second causes" and Satan is a major source of second causes. Roger Olsen (*Perspectives on the Doctrine of God*, 163) points out that Arminius himself argued that on Calvinist assumptions the only real sinner in the universe is God. I am struck by how in the present many Christians go ballistic over the "gnat" of open theism but happily embrace the "camel" of Calvinism.

has been scripted in advance. Calvinism claims that this also is true of real life and that, by implication, God delights in relationships with the characters who are playing out their divinely scripted roles.

In the modern world determinism is a dominant paradigm in secular philosophy, for honest atheists, based on the assumption that humans are products of natural evolutionary forces, can find no logical basis for libertarian free will. By contrast, Christians should celebrate that libertarian free will has a scriptural basis. The triune God, who is the perfect embodiment of libertarian freedom, chose to create people in his image, who are endowed with grace-enabled libertarian freedom, so that they could enter into a relationship of reciprocal love with their Creator.