

## The Wills of God:

### Assessing Arminian and Calvinist Accounts of God's Seemingly Conflicting Wills Toward Human Evil and the Scope of Salvation.

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#### I. Contradictory Wills?

One charge often raised against Calvinism is that it posits contradictory wills within God. However, the fact is that *both* Calvinists and Arminians must struggle with the question of how God can will one thing and yet at the same time appear to will to the contrary. This question arises for theologians of both persuasions at two distinct points: (a) in regard to the existence of human evil, and (b) in regard to the non-universal scope of salvation.

First, in regard to the existence of evil, both Calvinists and Arminians must provide an answer to the question of how God can, on the one hand, enjoin humans not to sin and yet, on the other hand, clearly will the commission of evil in at least some cases. The Calvinist faces the most sweeping challenge in this regard, given the Calvinist belief that *all* human desires, intentions, and acts, including *all evil* desires, intentions, and acts, are willed by God as part of his eternal decree of all that comes to pass (i.e., God's so-called *decretive will*). This decretive will of God appears to conflict with what has often been called God's *preceptive will* (i.e., moral will), by which God is morally opposed to the commission of sin (indeed, the very same sins that, according to Calvinism, God decretively wills humans to commit). Arminians do not face this tension between the decretive and preceptive wills of God in the same way as do Calvinists, given that Arminians either reject the notion of an exhaustive, unconditional decree of God, or else if they accept the idea of an exhaustive decree (like Arminius did himself) they generally assume that it is conditioned to some extent on God's foreknowledge of man's free choices. Arminians nonetheless do not entirely escape a similar dilemma, for they must still account for how God can will the existence of human evil in at least a permissive sense. Moreover, Arminians must reckon with those passages of Scripture which

suggest that God in particular instances does will or promote the commission of human sins in apparent contradiction to his revealed moral will (e.g., the sins of the Jewish leadership and Roman authorities who facilitated the death of Christ; Acts 2:23).

Second, in regard to the non-universal scope of salvation, both Calvinists and Arminians must account for how God can both will that everyone be saved and yet ultimately save only some. Again, this dilemma is perhaps most apparent for Calvinists, who believe that God of his own accord unconditionally elects to save only a portion of humanity. This raises the obvious question of how God can be said to truly will the salvation of all people if he takes unilateral steps to provide for the salvation of only some. While responding to this objection, some Calvinists (e.g., Turretin, Reymond) have countered that Arminianism faces a similar dilemma: If God truly wants all people to be saved, as Arminians often emphasize, and if God has the power to ensure this outcome (few Arminians would question that God has the *ability* to do so), then doesn't the fact that God does *not* ensure universal salvation contradict the claim that God desires all to be saved? What prevents God's will that all be saved from being an *efficacious* will? Indeed, how can God be considered truly God, some Calvinists argue, if his will can be thwarted?

In this essay I would like to explore in more detail the challenges faced by both Calvinists and Arminians in responding to the above objections related to apparent contradictions within the will(s) of God. The issues involved are at times both complex and subtle, which has no doubt contributed to the confusion often evident in this area of the theological literature. I hope to clarify somewhat in this essay just what the critical questions are, and what sort of answers are the most promising. In Section II below I will begin by assessing Calvinist and Arminian accounts of God's seemingly conflicting wills toward the existence of human evil. I will follow this in Section III with a discussion of Calvinist and Arminian resolutions to the apparent contradictions in God's will(s) toward the scope of human salvation. I should note that like its preceding companion essay, "Philosophical Reflections on Free Will," the present essay relies primarily on (nontechnical) philosophical and theological argumentation rather than on extensive biblical exegesis. I hope to address some of these same issues in a future essay (currently in preparation) on the topic of the divine decree(s), in which I hope to present arguments based on a more sustained biblical exegesis.

## II. God's Wills Toward the Existence of Evil

I will begin by considering the first paradox raised above, namely, the seemingly contradictory wills of God toward human sin. This paradox can be approached from two different perspectives. The first concerns the *logical possibility* of God willing seemingly contradictory outcomes at the same time. That is, how is it possible for God to will one thing (e.g., within Calvinism, the decretive outcome that man sin) and simultaneously will its apparent opposite (the preceptive outcome that man not sin) without the one will negating the other? We might call this the “logical question” regarding God’s seemingly contradictory wills toward human evil. The second perspective from which we can approach the paradox concerns the *morality* of God being involved in such a paradox. That is, even if we assume it is possible for God without any ultimate contradiction to will these seemingly contradictory outcomes, is it morally *right* for him to do so? Is God being fair to the human agents who play out the interaction of his decretive and preceptive wills? We might call this the “morality question” regarding God’s will(s) toward human evil. I will begin in Section A below by considering first the logical question, devoting most of my attention to an evaluation of Francis Turretin’s influential Calvinist formulation of the interaction between God’s permissive decretive will and his preceptive will. In Section B I will turn to the morality question, exploring in particular the relative usefulness for Calvinism versus Arminianism of an appeal to the greater good (per Augustine and Calvin) as a means to justify God’s willing of human sin. I will return once again in Section C to the logical question and propose a tentative resolution to the paradox of God’s seemingly contradictory wills toward human evil.

### A. The Logical Question and God’s Preceptive and Permissive Wills

We begin by considering the logical paradox raised by the assertion that God both wills and does not will that humans sin. As mentioned above, this paradox is most extensive when considered within the Calvinist worldview. According to Calvinism, God’s primary act was to unilaterally decree all that will ever come to pass within his creation. As the Westminster Confession declares, “God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass . . .” (Westminster Confession of Faith, III/i). This is the exercise of what Calvinists sometimes call God’s decretive will. God’s decretive will is said to encompass “whatsoever comes to pass;” that is, all events, including all evil desires,

intentions, choices, and acts on the part of all humans throughout history.

Those who hold to Calvinism are generally aware that this notion of an all-encompassing, determinative decree appears to conflict with the notion of God's moral, or preceptive will. The preceptive will is that will of God by which he prescribes that man choose what is good and abstain from what is evil. Whereas God's decretive will can be viewed as "what God wants to do," his preceptive will may in one sense be taken as referring to "what God wants *us* to do."<sup>1</sup> There would be no conflict between God's decretive and preceptive wills, of course, if God decretively willed that man commit only good deeds. The problem arises from the fact that God is said to decree both the good *and the evil* committed by people, while at the same time *being Himself morally good and enjoining people to be morally good as well*. This sets up an apparent conflict of wills within God: the decretive will that man commit evil, and the preceptive will that man (ought) not commit evil.

John Calvin recognized this appearance of contradictory wills within God toward human evil, but Calvin himself refused to delve into the logical aspects of the issue, instead concluding that the resolution of this paradox is simply an element of the divine mystery beyond human comprehension, there being no genuine contradiction in God's mind:

"Still, however, the will of God is not at variance with itself. It undergoes no change. He makes no pretense of not willing what he wills, but while in himself the will is one and undivided, to us it appears manifold, because, from the feebleness of our intellect, we cannot comprehend how, though after a different manner, he wills and wills not the very same thing. . . . Nay, when we cannot comprehend how God can will that to be done which he forbids us to do, let us call to mind our imbecility, and remember that the light in which he dwells is not without cause termed inaccessible, (1 Timothy 6:16,) because shrouded in darkness." (*Institutes*, I, 18, 3, p. 267-268).

One important early attempt within Calvinism to resolve the above paradox was made by the seventeenth century Reformed theologian Francis Turretin (*Institutes of Elenctic Theology, Vol. 1: First Through Tenth Topics*, Trans. by George Giger, Ed. By James Dennison, Jr., Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992), referred to by Samuel Alexander as "the best expounder of the doctrine of the Reformed Church." Turretin's resolution of the paradox in question seems to hinge on two central devices. First is

Turretin's definition of the preceptive will. At times Turretin presents a definition of God's preceptive will that is essentially equivalent to what I have presented above, as that which God "wills that we should do," in contrast to his decretive will which refers to "that which God wills to do or permit himself" (Vol. 1, Top. 3, Q. 15, II, p. 220). When he elaborates, however (as when he wrestles with the above paradox of conflicting wills within God), Turretin's definition takes on distinct emphases. For Turretin, the preceptive will of God, unlike the decretive will, concerns only God's willing "as to the *proposition of duty*, but yet not as to the execution of the event" (Vol. 1, Top. 3, Q. 15, V, p. 221; emphasis added). There are two important aspects to this definition: (a) the preceptive will is concerned only with a man's *duty* (what he *should* or *ought* to do rather than what he actually ends up doing), and (b) the object of the preceptive will is properly considered only the *proposition* of that duty (God preceptively wills only the *command* or *statement* of that duty, not any actions of man that may follow in consequence from that command or statement).

Given this understanding, Turretin can argue that there is no contradiction between the two types of divine wills, in that "they are not occupied about the same thing" (Vol. 1, Top. 3, Q. 15, V, p. 221). God's decretive will concerns what God wills to actually occur, whereas God's preceptive will (on Turretin's understanding) refers only to what "God *wills to enjoin upon man* as pleasing to himself and his bounden duty" (Vol. 1, Top. 3, Q. 15, XVI, p. 223; emphasis added).<sup>2</sup> That is, the preceptive will as defined by Turretin refers not to what God actually wants man to do (which could easily be construed as potentially conflicting with God's decretive will), but instead only to what God *wants to tell* (i.e., "enjoin upon") man to do. By way of illustration, consider Turretin's discussion of God's command for Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac:

"Thus God willed the immolation of Isaac by a will of sign [= preceptive will] as to the preception (i.e., he prescribed it to Abraham as a test of his obedience), but he nilled it by a beneplacit [= decretive] will as to the event itself because he had decreed to prohibit that slaughter. Now although these two acts of the divine will are diverse ("I *will to command* Abraham to slay his son" and "I do not will that immolation"), yet they are not contrary, for both were true—that God both *decreed to enjoin* this upon Abraham and equally decreed to hinder the effecting of it. Hence God without contrariety willed Isaac to be offered up and not to be offered up. He willed it as to the precept, but nilled it as to the effect." (Vol. 1, Top. 3, Q. 15, pp. 223-224; XVIII; emphasis added)

Though this move by Turretin may successfully prevent any contradiction between the decretive and preceptive wills by placing the preceptive will on an entirely different plane (i.e., as referring to what God wills or decrees to *say* about what man should do), it comes at a high cost. Followed through to its logical conclusion, Turretin's above explanation of the matter may be taken to suggest that God only has two kinds of desires or wills: (a) his will regarding what man actually does (i.e., decretive will), and (b) his will regarding *his own communication* to man regarding morality (i.e., Turretin's preceptive will). Missing from this scheme is any direct statement of the sort "God did not want the man to commit murder" (as applied to the case of one who actually commits murder). That is, by redefining the preceptive will so that it refers only to a decree concerning what God says *about his own communicative acts*, God can no longer be said to directly will a given action of man in terms of the *morality* of that action. Given Turretin's view, the closest God can come to willing that a person not sin (in a case where the person actually does sin) is for God to will to *say words* to the effect, "You should not sin." God's preceptive will cannot, however, reach beyond those words so as to apply directly to the action of the person. It seems to me that Turretin's formulation, once understood in this way, must be considered a radical and unsatisfactory departure from the traditional understanding God's moral will.

Whereas the first device above employed by Turretin in his attempt to resolve the tension between God's decretive and preceptive wills involved a redefinition of the preceptive will, Turretin's second device represents an attempt to resolve this tension by softening the force of God's decretive will. It does so by developing the concept of God's *permissive will*. It is important to note that for Turretin and other Calvinists, God's permissive will is not such that it allows humans any authentic power of self-determination, such that a person may *in fact* choose to either sin or not sin in a given instance. Instead, God's permissive will as formulated by Calvinists is one particular form of God's absolute decretive will; specifically, it is what Turretin terms an instance of God's "negative" decretive will, "by which he *determines not to hinder* the creature from sinning" but in such a way as to absolutely guarantee (foreordain) the sinful outcome (Vol. 1, Top. 3, Q. 15, VI, p. 221; emphasis added).

God's permissive will comes into play in cases where God preceptively commands obedience to a given law but then "does not [decretively] will to give [man] the strength" to obey that law. Turretin asserts that a permissive (negative) decree of this sort "does

not contend with [God's] command when he prescribes to man his bounden duty" (i.e., God's permissive decretive will and his preceptive will do not conflict). Instead, Turretin argues, there would be a contradiction only "if God by the power of his decree would *impel* men to do what he has by his law prohibited, or if when attempting to obey the law he would by an opposite impediment *recall* them from obedience," in which case God "would will repugnancies and be himself opposed to his own will" (Vol. 1, Top. 3, Q. 15, V, p. 221; emphasis added). This, Turretin asserts, God does not do.

Turretin's argument from permissive will essentially boils down to the following claim: God's decretive and preceptive wills regarding human evil cannot in principle conflict, because in exercising his permissive decree, God is simply choosing to in some sense withdraw any coercive influence on his part (i.e., such that he neither "impels" nor "recalls") and to not stand in the way of ("not to hinder") the natural, inexorable human initiative to sin. According to this understanding of permissive will, when humans sin it is because God has decided (decreed) not to empower them ("he does not will to give [them] the strength") to overcome their natural impulses to sin. It might be said (though Calvinists themselves might not choose to word it this way) that God is merely determining that outcome to occur (i.e., human sin) which humans would in some sense choose to will anyway.

There is, however, a monumental problem with this conception of a permissive decree. The whole point of appealing to a negative permissive will of God toward human sin within a Calvinist worldview seems to be to in some sense "get God out of the way" when it comes to human sin so that God cannot be charged as the author of that sin. Put differently, the concept of a negative permissive decree is designed to benefit Calvinism by gaining the emotional force of the *absence* of a divine decree for human sin, *without actually having to posit* such an absence. Turretin could thus say that God simply "does not hinder" man's impulse to sin, and likewise "does not give man the strength" to overcome this impulse. But here is where the problem arises: Does a negative permissive decree of the sort envisioned by Turretin adequately characterize God's involvement in the process of bringing about human sin within a Calvinist worldview? I think not, for if God's permissive decree in regard to sin is truly limited to having negative force, as Turretin has argued in order to avoid a conflict between it and God's preceptive will, this leaves us wondering what *positive* force remains to determine or ensure the human choice to sin.

There are only two logical possibilities. The first is that some factor(s) outside the scope of and therefore not determined by the divine decree provides the impetus for human sin. This, however, is not an available option within the Calvinist worldview. Recall that within consistent Calvinism, God's eternal decree is exhaustive; there is *nothing* within creation that it does not touch, there is *no* event or state outside of God himself that is not determined by the decree. As stated earlier, this includes all sinful intentions, desires, choices, and acts on the part of humans. This exhaustive nature of the divine decree is demanded within Calvinism by Calvinists understanding of the sovereignty of God: To the extent that there might be any state, condition, or event not fully determined by God, then to that extent his absolute sovereignty over creation would be seen as compromised. Accordingly, there can be no human initiative or desire that is in any sense "outside of" God's eternal decree; there can be no undetermined, independent human initiative or desire that might be left "unhindered" to motivate human sin. There can be no sense of what man would "really" wish or choose to do considered somehow apart from the divine decree. The divine decree necessarily encompasses and determines all human impulses and responses; this is true regardless whether one views the implementation of that decree in a direct, hard-determinist sense or in a soft-determinist, compatibilist sense (i.e., in which God decisively conditions all human choices by means of the person's inner and outer environments; for discussion see my essay "Philosophical Reflections on Free Will"). In either case, the Calvinist conception of God's decretive will is such that each aspect of man's sin--from its initial impulse in the realm of human desire to its consummation in the act of sin itself--each aspect of this process is necessarily ordered and ensured by the divine decree. It is not possible within Calvinism, then, that the positive impetus for human sin could arise from any factor(s) lying outside the scope of the divine decree.

The only other possibility available, and the only one consistent with Calvinism, is that some factor(s) governed by God's positive (i.e., nonpermissive) decree must provide the positive impetus for human sin. Likely candidates include the factors that underlie human depravity, the factors that condition the human free will in a compatibilistic sense to choose as it does, and so forth. Crucially, all such factors must be considered within Calvinism as wholly determined and ordered by the (positive) divine decree, not as independent of that decree. As Berkhof states, "There is no absolute principle of self-activity in the creature, to which God simply joins His activity. In every instance the impulse to action and movement proceeds from God. . . . So God also enables and prompts His rational creatures, as second causes, to function, and that not merely by

endowing them with energy in a general way, but by energizing them to certain specific acts” (*Systematic Theology: New Edition*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996, p. 173).<sup>3</sup> Thus, God positively orders all of the circumstances that make human nature what it is, and he either directly or compatibilistically conditions all of the factors within our environment that work together to render our choices to sin certain.

But--and here is the critical point--if God so orders our nature and environment, then what is the benefit of Turretin’s appeal to a permissive negative decree? Turretin’s original intent in appealing to a permissive decree with strictly negative force was to rule out any possibility of conflict between this negative permissive decree and God’s preceptive will that man should not sin. Turretin believed that by so formulating God’s decretive will toward human sin in a negative fashion, he could then say that God via this permissive will did not *actively* promote human sin or compel man to sin, but instead simply omitted to give man the strength to obey God’s law and thereby did not stand in the way of human nature taking its course. But if that very same human nature turns out to be wholly determined elsewhere by God’s positive decree, and if God so orders our environments such that our choice to sin is rendered certain, then the original problem faced by Turretin reemerges. How can God positively order reality such that humans will inevitably sin, and at the same time preceptively enjoin humans not to sin? Turretin’s claim that God does not “compel” humans to sin but rather only negatively decrees (permits) that they will sin seems beside the point, for the exhaustive nature of God’s positive decree in the realm of human nature, human intentions, and the human environment, with or without a negative permissive decree, yields the same “compelling” result that humans are unfailingly determined by God to sin.

It seems to me that by focusing exclusively on this notion of God’s negative (permissive) decree in regard to human sin, Turretin and those who have followed in his footsteps have failed to see the relevance within their system of the broader *positive* decree of God for the occurrence of human sin. We might say that Turretin and his heirs are guilty of tunnel vision, having attempted to derive the benefits of a “negative” decree in regard to human sin while ignoring the implications of God’s broader positive decree. Within consistent Calvinism, the permissive will said by Turretin to simply “not hinder” man’s sin is but a part of the larger exhaustive decree by which, in keeping with the Calvinist understanding of God’s unilateral sovereignty, God knowingly intends to absolutely determine all of those factors ensuring that man will in fact sin. Ultimately, then, there is no way within a Calvinist system for the positive force driving human sin to be

accounted for outside of God's exhaustive decree. Limiting the permissive aspect of God's decretive will such that it has only negative force does not solve the problem of contradictory wills within God; it simply shifts the problem to another area of God's decretive will, namely, his positive decree. It thus appears that Turretin has jumped out of the frying pan only to land in the fire, and the apparent contradiction between God's decretive and preceptive wills within Calvinism stands, despite Turretin's efforts to prove the contrary.<sup>4,5</sup>

We have seen, then, that Turretin attempted to deal with the apparent logical contradiction between God's decretive and preceptive wills by first redefining God's preceptive will as pertaining only to what God wills *to communicate* regarding morality, and second by softening the force of God's decretive will toward human sin such that it is only a *negative permissive* decree. I have argued above that Turretin failed on both counts. Calvin, in contrast, did not attempt to analyze the logical paradox as such, but remained content to assign it as one of the unsolvable mysteries of the divine mind. In Section II.C below I will return to this question of the logical possibility of God having opposing wills, and will suggest a preliminary resolution to the paradox. In order to understand my proposal there, however, it will be necessary for us to first consider the apparent contradiction within God's wills toward human evil from a moral rather than logical perspective.

## **B. The Morality Question and the Argument from a Greater Good**

The question being considered in this section is as follows: Even if we assume that it is possible for God without any ultimate contradiction to hold seemingly contradictory wills toward human evil, is it *morally right* for him to do so? Is God being fair to the human agents who play out the interaction of his decretive and preceptive wills? Calvin was less reticent to address this second question (i.e., the morality question) than he was to address the first question (i.e., the logical possibility question). In regard to this morality question, Calvin followed Augustine in arguing that God can rightly decree man's sin, because he uses man's sin as a means to various good ends (e.g., the just punishment of the wicked, the availability of redemption through Christ's death). God's intentions are thus good, unlike the intentions of the humans who commit the sins in question. As Calvin quotes Augustine, God can accordingly remain guiltless throughout the process while man is held guilty because "in the one act which they did, the reasons

for which they did it are different” (*Institutes*, I, 18, 4, pp. 270).

Augustine and Calvin’s proposal here is essentially an argument from the “greater good,” whereby God wills human sin for the sake of achieving a greater or higher good purpose that in some sense transcends or counterbalances the evil involved. In such cases, God subordinates a particular aspect of his preceptive will in order to achieve a greater good than could have been achieved through compliance with the precept alone. It seems to me that this basic insight drawn upon here by Augustine and Calvin is correct, though, as we will see below, the reasoning underlying the argument may ultimately prove more helpful to Arminians than to Calvinists. The general validity of an argument from the greater good can perhaps most easily be seen from any of numerous examples that might be constructed from within the human realm. Imagine, for example, a situation in which two kidnappers holding a hostage get into an argument with each other. Blows are exchanged, and the hostage takes the opportunity to slip away unnoticed while the kidnappers are thus distracted. When the police officers and the relatives of the now-free hostage learn how the escape took place, they are delighted that the kidnappers got into an argument and fought each other. (Indeed, clever police officers negotiating with the kidnappers might even have tried to trigger such an argument between the kidnappers in order to bring about this very result.) And yet, we would hardly blame the officers or the relatives for desiring that the kidnappers sin against each other by getting into a fight, precisely because the kidnappers doing so allowed the achievement of a greater good, namely, the escape of the hostage.

John Piper (“Are There Two Wills in God?” in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, Thomas R. Schreiner & Bruce A. Ware (Eds.), Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995, 2000, pp. 107-131) has astutely observed that arguments from a greater good are required within *both* Calvinism and Arminianism to account for the moral validity of seemingly contradictory wills in God. Though Piper’s focus is on the question of how God can will all to be saved and yet ultimately save only some (a question I will address below in Part III of this essay), his comments are also applicable to the question at hand concerning human evil. Before we consider Piper’s remarks in more detail, recall that, as I mentioned in the introduction to this essay, both Calvinism and Arminianism face daunting questions about God’s multiple wills toward human evil. Until now I have focused primarily on the challenges this paradox presents to Calvinism (*viz.*, how can God exhaustively decree all instances of human sin while at the same time preceptively willing that man not sin), but an Arminian

understanding of God's relation to the world raises similar questions.

To begin with, even if per Arminianism God does not generally *decree* that humans sin (i.e., God does not determine their specific sins to be certain by his own volition), the reality that there *is* sin in the world forces Arminians to acknowledge that God knowingly *permits* sin to occur (though not in the decretive sense of permission, as Calvinists such as Turretin would claim; see Section II.A above). The significance of this observation increases when we remember that God was presumably under no compulsion to create the world or humans in the first place. Moreover, even granting the creation of humans, God presumably has sufficient wisdom and power to have created a world in which humans were conditioned to perform only good. The fact is, however, that God created humans beings with genuine freedom of will and the ability to obey or disobey him. Indeed, God created them even though in his omniscience he knew beforehand that humans would sin against him. It is clear, then, that even from an Arminian perspective God in some sense willed that humans would sin by virtue of the fact that he (a) in at least in most cases does not stop them from sinning despite having the power to do so, and (b) created them with the capacity to sin despite knowing beforehand that they would sin (for discussion of this and related points from a Calvinist perspective, see Gordon H. Clark, *Religion, Reason and Revelation*, Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961, p. 205; also Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998, pp. 350-353; for Arminius' view of the permissive will of God, see "Public Disputations," *The Works of James Arminius*, London Edition, Vol. II, trans. James Nichols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986, Disputations 9 and 10, pp. 162-189). Though this Arminian sense in which God wills human sin is not deterministically causal in the same way that Calvinism's divine decree is, Arminians must still contend with the fact that God has generally chosen not to prevent the commission of the very sins that he proscribes in his moral law.

It is at this point that Piper's remarks come into play (John Piper, "Are There Two Wills in God?" in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, Thomas R. Schreiner & Bruce A. Ware (Eds.), Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995, 2000, pp. 107-131). Why does God permit man to sin while at the same time enjoining him not to sin (and punishing him for his sin)? The answer assumed by both Calvinists and Arminians, Piper says, is that "God is committed to something even more valuable" than preventing the occurrence of human evil. "The difference between Calvinists and Arminians lies not in whether there are two wills in God, but in what they

say this higher commitment is.” For Calvinists, God permits (decrees) human sin in order to achieve the greater good seen in the “manifestation of the full range of God’s glory in wrath and mercy,” as well as the related good realized in the “the humbling of man.” For Arminians, God permits human sin in order to preserve the greater good of “human self-determination [i.e., authentic human freedom reflecting the image of God in man] and the possible resulting love relationship with God” (Piper, p. 124).

Both Calvinists and Arminians, then, attempt to answer the moral question of how God can simultaneously both will and proscribe human sin by appealing to an argument from the greater good. The greater good invoked by Calvinists tends to be the glory of God revealed in his wrath and mercy, whereas the greater good generally invoked by Arminians is the love relationship with God made possible by significant human freedom. Which of these is correct? Obviously, the answer to that question will ultimately depend on an extensive amount of biblical exegesis that would take me beyond the scope of this essay, in which I am instead considering the nature of God’s will from a philosophical-theological perspective. In all likelihood there is a measure of truth in *both* of the above conceptions of the greater good for which God allows human evil. However, there do seem to me to be reasons to favor the Arminian understanding of the issue as the more basic. Let me explain.

The Arminian appeal to significant human freedom as a justification for the existence of human evil is rooted in an ancient argument stretching back at least as far as Augustine and echoed more recently by writers such as C. S. Lewis (*The Problem of Pain*). The various versions of this argument have been referred to as Free Will Theodicies (“theodicy” = an explanation of why God allows evil) by one of the argument’s ablest expositors in the modern era, Alvin Plantinga (*God, Freedom, and Evil*, Harper & Row, 1974; Eerdmans, 1977). Plantinga, for reasons that need not concern us here,<sup>6</sup> characterizes his own presentation of this argument more specifically as the Free Will Defense, the purpose of which is to demonstrate philosophically that there are some good states of affairs that God cannot himself bring about without permitting the existence of evil. The Free Will Defense attempts to show that the existence of human evil is consistent with the existence of a God who is omniscient, omnipotent, and wholly good. The main argument is summarized by Plantinga as follows:

“A world containing creatures who are significantly free . . . is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all. Now God can create free

creatures, but He can't *cause* or *determine* them to do only what is right. For if He does so, then they aren't significantly free after all; they do not do what is right *freely*. To create creatures capable of *moral good*, therefore, He must create creatures capable of moral evil; and He can't give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so. . . . The fact that free creatures sometimes go wrong . . . counts neither against God's omnipotence nor against His goodness; for He could have forestalled the occurrence of moral evil only by removing the possibility of moral good" (*God, Freedom, and Evil*, Harper & Row, 1974; Eerdmans, 1977, p. 30)

Crucial to this argument is how one defines human freedom. To be "significantly free" with respect to a given action means that a person is "free to perform that action and free to refrain from performing it; no antecedent conditions and/or causal laws determine that he will perform the action, or that he won't. It is within his power, at the time in question, to take or perform the action and within his power to refrain from it" (Plantinga, p. 29). This is essentially a statement of what philosophers sometimes call *contra-causal* or *libertarian* free will, which contrasts to the notion of *compatibilistic* freedom accepted by most Calvinists. According to Compatibilism, all seemingly free actions of humans are in actuality decisively conditioned by God through the characteristics of the person's mental and external environments, with the result that all human choices are predetermined by God to occur just as they do and not otherwise. In contrast, contra-causal freedom entails the ability to *do otherwise*. The contra-causally (or significantly) free agent, as Plantinga states, has it "within his power" to either "perform the action" or "refrain from it" (for extensive discussion of these differing conceptions of human free will see the separate essay "Philosophical Reflections on Free Will").

The Free Will Defense (or Theodicy) offers Arminians a robust response to the question of why God permits human evil. God permits evil because in his wisdom he saw that doing so was the only way to ensure the possibility of significant human freedom, which in turn is a prerequisite for what we might term *significant relationships*; that is, relationships in which the contribution of neither member is causally predetermined or decisively conditioned by the other (or by a third party). This does not mean that the members of a significant relationship may not influence one another's choices. Rather, it only means that in a significant relationship, each member of the relationship ultimately has the ability to either participate in or withdraw from the relationship; in short, each member may exercise contra-causal freedom in regard to the relationship. The most

important relationship, of course, is that between God and man. Arminians believe that it is crucial to the integrity of the relationship between the two that *both* God *and* man exercise contra-causal freedom with respect to the relationship. God ensured this possibility by creating man “in his image” (Genesis 1:27), one aspect of which by hypothesis includes man’s ability to exercise significant (contra-causal) freedom, just as God himself possesses.

It must be emphasized that in order to succeed, the Free Will Defense (Theodicy) requires a contra-causal rather than compatibilistic understanding of human free will. Why this is so can be seen once we recall the main claim of the Free Will Defense, that God could not have prevented human evil without precluding the exercise of significant human free will. Under Compatibilism, however, there is no reason to think that God could *not* have prevented human evil without precluding human free will (i.e., as Compatibilism understands the term “free will”). That is, if the good and evil choices of humans are all equally conditioned and determined to be exactly what they are by God (as Compatibilism in conjunction with Calvinism teaches), then it is difficult to see why God could not have just as easily conditioned and determined *all human choices to be good* (thereby preventing the occurrence of evil). The fact that he did not do so cannot be explained by appealing to human free will as conceived within Compatibilism, since such a formulation of “free will” should be equally compatible with any predetermined outcome that might be conditioned by God. Indeed, the whole point of calling it “compatibilistic” freedom is to claim that human freedom is really *compatible with* (theological) determinism; hence one can see no reason why such freedom could not be compatible with a world that was determined by God to be wholly morally good with no sin.

The question, then, for Calvinism is why God did not (given the assumption of compatibilistic freedom) simply go ahead and condition man to always desire only good choices? If God didn’t care to give man significant freedom (of the contra-causal sort described by Plantinga above), then why did he bother to allow evil to flourish when he could have readily prevented it? The standard Calvinist response to this is the one mentioned earlier, that God instead desired to decree human sin in order to demonstrate his wrath and mercy, and thereby increase his glory. Reformed theologian Robert Reymond is representative when he proposes that the highest good for which God allows evil is “the unabridged, unqualified *glorification of God himself* in the praises of his saints for his judgment against their enemies and for his stark, contrasting display to

them—who equally deserved the same judgment—of his surpassing great grace in Christ Jesus. And *that* end God regards as sufficient reason to decree what he has, including even the fact and presence of evil in his world!” (Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1998, p. 378, emphasis in the original). Without the existence of human sin, there would presumably have been no opportunity for God to express his wrath and mercy and thereby gain glory in this way.

I see two problems with this Calvinist appeal to God’s glory as being the greater good for which God decrees human evil. First, it is not clear that such an appeal really gains what it claims to gain over the Arminian alternative. Calvinists claim that God decrees human evil in order to allow himself the opportunity to display his wrath on sin and his mercy on (some) sinners. Yet, how is this an advantage over the Arminian scheme of things? Is not God’s wrath and mercy displayed for the benefit of his glory within the Arminian scheme as well? According to the Arminian understanding of Scripture, God burns with holy wrath upon all sinners for their rebellion against his law and what he has revealed of his nature; likewise, God lovingly extends his incomparable grace and mercy to those who abandon all hope in their own merits and place their loyal faith in Jesus Christ. The fact of human sin, which God knew in his omniscience before he created the world, gives equal opportunity for God to exhibit both his wrath and his mercy to man, regardless whether that sin is decretively determined (as Calvinists say) or not (as Arminians say). Arminians can thus fully acknowledge all the Scriptural expressions of God’s wrath and mercy, and glorify him for the love and holiness to which these expressions point.

The only significant factor present in the Calvinist scheme that might be argued to be lacking in the Arminian scheme is the greater opportunity within the former for God to make unilateral determinations (e.g., unconditionally decreeing that some individuals will experience eternal salvation and others eternal condemnation). However, I have argued at length elsewhere (see the essay “Does Arminianism Diminish God’s Glory?”), based on a survey of relevant Scripture passages, that the Bible does not ground God’s glory in the exercise of unilateral determinations of this sort. Though God certainly has the right and ability to make unilateral determinations (his decision to create the universe being, of course, the prime example), the Bible seems to generally point elsewhere when establishing a basis for God’s glory. Therefore, it seems to me that the Calvinist insistence that God act unilaterally at every possible opportunity in order to preserve his

glory to the maximum degree is misguided.

Moreover, it must be remembered that Calvinism's appeal to God's glory as being the greater good for which God decrees human evil, while gaining no advantage over its Arminian alternative (as just argued), actually comes at a high cost: namely, the inability to recognize significant (contra-causal) human freedom. As noted earlier, Arminians argue that there can be no meaningful relationship between God and humanity such as the Bible portrays without significant, contra-causal freedom on the part of *both God and man*. A wholly conditioned, one-sided relationship of the sort entailed by Calvinism, in which God unilaterally decrees how the relationship plays out for both sides, rings hollow upon thoughtful, unbiased reflection.

Does all of this mean that Arminians must reject the notion that God seeks to magnify his own glory? Not at all. Indeed, as I hinted earlier, I think there is an important kernel of truth in the Calvinist appeal to the glory of God as a greater good motivating God's actions. One could run through a long list of Scripture passages (as Calvinists often do) that clearly suggest God is jealous for his glory. And yet, it is important to remember that the Scriptures do not isolate God's love for man, on the one hand, from his desire to receive glory from man, on the other hand, but rather tends to wed these two themes in speaking of God's motivation for his acts on behalf of man. Consider, for example, Paul's assertion in Ephesians that God's redemptive works through Christ are for "the praise of the *glory* of his *grace*" (NASB; Ephesians 1:6; NIV "*his glorious grace*"). It seems to me that this phrase beautifully captures the proper perspective on the relationship between God's glory and his grace. There is no competition between God's desire to maintain his glory and his desire to extend grace. Nor does he extend grace solely for the purpose of maximizing his glory (the "praise" and "glory" are said to arise on account of his "grace," not the other way around). Instead, God extends grace freely, unselfishly, exuberantly, even what some might consider wastefully (cf. the father of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32) because it is his nature to do so, and for *this* paramount reason he gains immeasurable, wholly merited praise and glory. This is a perspective that Arminians can fully embrace.

There is, moreover, another sense in which the Arminian worldview with its recognition of significant human freedom uniquely magnifies the glory of God. I touched on this in the essay "Does Arminianism Diminish God's Glory?" There I noted that acts of obedience and sacrifice by believers (e.g., martyrdom) acquire their extraordinary force

and significance precisely because they are free and voluntary acts, initiated by human agents for the purpose of glorifying God. It does *not* strengthen the force of these acts to view them as the Calvinist does as originating within God's determinative decree, such that the human agent could not have chosen otherwise than to make the sacrifice in question. If anything, viewing these acts as the Calvinist does risks *decreasing* their value insofar as contributing to the glory of God, for on a Calvinist understanding the acts become motions within a divinely orchestrated script over which the human actors have no *ultimate* control. This basic observation can be broadened to apply to all aspects of the development of significant relationships between God and man and among men. When humans exercise significant human freedom so as to cooperatively establish significant relationships, this very act as well as the resulting relationships (to which human free will contributes) brings glory to God. This is so because the exercise of human free will is an aspect of the image of God in man; therefore, the good fruits of that capacity are an image or reflection of God's own goodness and redound to his glory. Moreover, to the extent that the Church freely cooperates with the working of divine grace such that these significant relationships among the members of the Body of Christ are characterized by increasing love and holiness, to this extent God's glory is further intensified, as the Church "attain[s] to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13). This is the most important aspect of God's eternal plan of the ages, namely, "the summing up of all things in Christ" (Ephesians 1:10), our role in this plan being "to the praise of his glory" (Ephesians 1:12, 14).

The first major problem, then, with the Calvinist appeal to God's glory as the greater good for which God decrees human evil is that this move not only does not really gain what it claims to gain over an Arminian account, but at the same time actually loses something of great importance, namely, the recognition of significant freedom on the part of man and the integrity of the relationship this makes possible with God. Somewhat ironically for the Calvinist, it is this very freedom in man as posited within Arminianism that makes possible authentic acts of obedience and sacrifice, as well as significant relationships characterized by love and holiness, that together redound to God's glory.

There is a second problem as well with the standard Calvinist appeal to God's glory as the greater good justifying God's decree of human evil. Notice that the rationale for God's glorification within the Calvinist appeal hinges on the significance of the terms *judgment* and *grace* (cf. the quote by Robert Reymond given earlier). However, the meaning of both these terms depends to a large extent on the nature of *moral guilt*, a

concept whose meaning in turn depends directly on the nature of human *free will*. If Arminian arguments concerning human free will are correct that genuine culpability for sin on the part of humans cannot be adequately conceptualized within a deterministic framework (for extensive discussion see my essay “Philosophical Reflections on Free Will”), then it becomes highly questionable whether within such a framework the related concepts of judgment and grace can carry the significance that Calvinists wish to attach to them, precisely because these concepts are ultimately tied to the notion of human free will. If, despite Calvinists’ protests to the contrary, human free will is a largely vacuous concept within a deterministic framework, then “judgment” and “grace” lose much of their force as well within this same framework. This result casts grave doubt on attempts by Calvinist determinists to ground an account of human evil in these concepts. Arminians, in contrast, recognize the existence of significant (contra-causal) human freedom and thus may legitimately draw on concepts such as judgment and grace when developing accounts of the existence of evil.

It appears, then, that the notion of the “greater good” employed by Calvin and others to explain why God permits (Calvinists would say “decrees”) human sin turns out to benefit Arminians more than Calvinists. There is, however, still one more significant challenge facing Arminians in respect to the moral “rightness” of God permitting human evil. For even Arminians must recognize the clear teaching in Scripture that God in at least some cases (which Arminians tend to see as the exception rather than the rule) actively promotes if not directly determines or ensures that particular humans will carry through with sinful actions.<sup>7</sup> Obvious examples from Scripture include God’s role in ensuring Pharaoh’s refusal to let the Israelites leave Egypt (Exodus 4:21, 7:3, 9:12, 10:1, 10:27, 11:10, 14:4, 14:17) and in bringing about the evil actions of the Jews and Romans responsible for Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion (Acts 2:23) (see Robert Reymond’s comments on these passages, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1998, pp. 359, 365; also see Arminius’ comments on various passages of this sort in “Apology Against Thirty-One Theological Articles,” *The Works of James Arminius*, London Edition, Vol. II, trans. James Nichols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986, Art. 23, pp. 40-42, and “Public Disputations,” *ibid.*, Disp. 9, VI-XX, pp. 164-175, and Disp. 10, VI-XII, pp. 181-186).

The question, of course, is how in these instances God can, on the one hand, work to bring about the commission of sin by humans and yet, on the other hand, preceptively enjoin people not to commit these same sins. These cases might be said to parallel, in a

more limited sense, the problem faced by Calvinists when they hold that God more generally decrees human sin. Though Arminians reject the notion of an exhaustive unconditional decree of all events of the sort envisioned by Calvinists, Arminians run into the same conceptual problem when they grant that God in certain specific cases promotes human sin. One might think of such cases from within the Arminian perspective as a “specific decree” of particular instances of human sin that stands in seeming contradiction to God’s preceptive will.

The answer to this quandary for the Arminian, it seems to me, is again an appeal to the notion of a greater good, except that this time the greater good is not the preservation of human free will (which perhaps may well be overridden by God in some of these instances; see Note 7), but instead a greater good that is specific to the goals God wishes to achieve through the situation. For example, the greater good achieved by God’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart was the glory brought to God by Pharaoh’s persistent resistance (Exodus 6:7, 9:16, 10:1-2, 11:9). The greater good achieved through the jealousy of the Jewish leaders and selfishness of the Roman authorities who brought about Jesus’ crucifixion was the provision of an atoning sacrifice for the sins of humanity. In each case we can assume that, the circumstances of the situation being what they were (i.e., including the constraints placed on the situation by the results of the prior sins of men), the particular greater good in question could not have been achieved except through the agency of man’s sinful actions. God’s intention in bringing about the sinful state of affairs was therefore good (i.e., his intention was to achieve the greater good particular to that situation), with the result that he could justifiably and without guilt act to ensure that these sinful actions took place. In contrast, the human agent in such cases does not have in view the greater good but instead intends the sin for its own sake. As Calvin suggested (following Augustine; see discussion above), the human agent is for this reason guilty for his actions.

The above line of reasoning raises a question: If Arminians can resolve the dilemma of how God can work to bring about human sin in particular, exceptional cases (the “specific decree”) by appealing to God’s intention to achieve a *specific* greater good (i.e., not the general preservation of human freedom, but instead a greater good specific to the situation), why cannot *Calvinists* employ a similar tactic to explain God’s exhaustive decree of all human sin (not the general appeal to the glory of God already critiqued above, but instead an appeal to a greater good specific to each situation). Such an approach has been called “meticulous providence” (Michael Petersen, *Evil and the*

*Christian God*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1982), the idea that there exists a *specific* greater good counterbalancing *each and every* instance of human sin, or as William Hasker phrases it, “that every single instance of evil that occurs is such that God’s permitting either that specific evil or some other equal or greater evil is necessary for some greater good which is better than anything God could have brought about with permitting the evil in question.” Citing examples such as the Holocaust, Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait, and the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia (“or a thousand more that could have been added”), Hasker concludes that such a proposal of meticulous providence “strains one’s credulity almost beyond limits” (William Hasker, “A Philosophical Perspective,” in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1994, pp. 146-147). Indeed, it is not just “a thousand” more examples that could be added to those cited by Hasker, but multiplied billions upon billions throughout the course of human history—every single human sin that has ever been committed. I agree with Hasker that to posit a *specific* greater good offsetting each of these innumerable sins would not be a credible course for Calvinists to take. This perhaps explains why Calvinists are instead usually content to appeal to the general glory of God as the greater good justifying God’s exhaustive decree (an appeal whose shortcomings I have already noted above).

To summarize this section, it seems to me that Arminians, ironically, are in a better position than Calvinists to make use of Augustine’s and Calvin’s appeal to the greater good as an answer to the moral question regarding God’s seemingly contradictory wills toward human sin (i.e., how God can rightly permit or promote the occurrence of the same human sins that he proscribes). Arminians may build on the Free Will Defense to argue that God permits (not decrees) all human evil because to do so is the only way to preserve significant human freedom, which in turn achieves the greater good of making possible significant love relationships between God and man and among men. In addition, Arminians may account for special cases in which God promotes particular instances of human sin (the “specific decree”) by arguing that in each such case there is a specific greater good that can only be realized through the occurrence of that sin. God is guiltless in such cases because his intention in promoting the sin is the attainment of the greater good, whereas the human agent involved remains guilty because his intention rises no higher than the sin itself. Calvinists also commonly appeal to the notion of a greater good in accounting for God’s willing of human sin; specifically, they appeal to the magnification of the glory of God achieved through the display of God’s wrath and mercy on sinners as the greater good justifying God’s decree of all human sin. I argued,

however, that this Calvinist appeal to God's glory fails to gain anything over the Arminian alternative, given that God can also display his wrath and mercy (and thereby magnify his glory) equally well within the Arminian worldview and, what is more, without having to compromise significant human freedom and the significant relationships made possible by such freedom. In addition, I argued that the concepts of wrath and mercy assumed in the Calvinist account lose much of their force in a system that fails to recognize significant (contra-causal) human free will. Finally, I argued that Calvinists may not appeal to a meticulous providence as an alternative justification for God's decree of human evil for the simple reason that the number of sins involved (every human sin ever committed) is too high to make this a credible alternative. It appears, then, that Calvinism is left without a satisfactory answer to the "moral question" of how God can rightly decree human sin and simultaneously proscribe it through his preceptive will. I conclude, therefore, that Arminianism presents the more reasonable alternative in this respect.

### **C. The Logical Question Revisited**

Before proceeding in Part III to the question of God's will(s) regarding the scope of salvation, let me first pay off the promissory note that I left the reader at the end of Section II.A above; that is, let me suggest a tentative resolution to the apparent logical contradiction involved in God having opposing wills toward human evil. Logically speaking, how can God on the one hand will that humans sin (i.e., via his permissive will, which, I will assume based on the preceding arguments, is nondecretive in nature and is justified by the greater good made possible through the preservation of significant human freedom) and yet on the other hand will that humans *not* sin (i.e., via his preceptive will)? I argued earlier that Francis Turretin's attempt to resolve this paradox failed. John Calvin, in contrast, chose to leave the paradox unresolved by assigning it to the realm of divine mystery. I do not disparage Calvin in this regard; it may be that we too will ultimately conclude that no satisfactory solution to this logical paradox is available, in which case it would be the course of wisdom to follow Calvin's example.

Perhaps it would be premature to give up entirely on the problem just yet, however, for it seems to me that this logical question regarding God's opposing wills does not have the air we would expect of a true divine mystery. For one thing, the phenomenon is not limited to the divine realm, but holds true within the human realm as well, it being clearly possible for a human agent to hold seemingly contradictory wills at once. John Piper

(“Are There Two Wills in God?” in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, Thomas R. Schreiner & Bruce A. Ware (Eds.), Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995, 2000, p. 128) shares an example from Robert L. Dabney (“God’s Indiscriminate Proposals of Mercy, as Related to his Power, Wisdom, and Sincerity,” in *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, vol. 1, Edinburgh, 1890; Banner of Truth Trust, 1967, pp. 282-313), who drawing from Chief Justice Marshall’s *Life of Washington* tells the story surrounding George Washington’s signing of the death warrant for a certain traitor named Major Andre. The gist of Dabney’s illustration is that Washington felt compassion for the traitor and yet simultaneously was moved by higher principles of wisdom, duty, patriotism, etc., to nonetheless sign the warrant for his execution. Clearly, Washington simultaneously both wanted and did not want Major Andre to die. More mundane examples of this sort could easily be multiplied from each of our own lives. Standing on the edge of the diving board, my daughter both wants and doesn’t want to experience her very first dive into the water. Sitting on the edge of my son’s bed, I both want and do not want to apply the spanking that he has just earned. Peering into the refrigerator, the person struggling with a diet both wants and does not want to eat that slice of chocolate pie. If we humans can hold in tension such a wide range of conflicting emotions and desires, surely God in a much more profound and pure sense is capable of simultaneously willing and not willing certain actions in regard to humans, even if we do not know quite how to characterize this phenomenon.

Recognizing that a full and satisfactory analysis, if possible at all, is far beyond the scope of this essay, I will nonetheless hazard a preliminary explanation of how God can logically both will and not will a human agent to sin. The key to unlocking the paradox, it seems to me, is to recognize (as I have argued above) that whenever God wills humans to sin it is always for the attainment of some greater good. This is true both in the case of God’s general permissive will allowing humans to exercise significant human free will to sin (a permissive will on God’s part that I take to be nondecretive) and in the case of God’s particular will to promote specific sins in special cases for the attainment of a specific greater good. In each case, God’s will for the human agent to sin is strictly subordinate to his will that the greater good be achieved. The former will (that the human agent sin) is thus necessarily embedded within the latter will (that the greater good be achieved) and cannot be considered in isolation from it. God’s will in such cases is never simply a desire *that man sin*, but instead it is a desire *that man’s sin achieve the greater good*.<sup>8</sup> God does *not* desire that the human agent sin *in isolation from* the achievement of that greater good. Consequently, God’s will that the human agent sin

cannot be isolated in such a way as to directly oppose it to God's preceptive will that the agent not sin. If these two wills thus framed cannot be directly opposed, then the apparent contradiction between them disappears.

To the extent that, as argued in Section II.B above, Calvinism does not have legitimate recourse to an argument from the greater good to justify an exhaustive divine decree (i.e., because the Calvinist appeal to God's glory as the greater good depends on notions of wrath and mercy that are without sufficient foundations given the Calvinist understanding of human freedom), then to that extent Calvinism cannot use the explanation just proposed as a means to resolve the apparent conflict of wills within God. Arminianism, in contrast, may employ the above explanation precisely because Arminianism has a more legitimate recourse to arguments from the greater good (see Section II.B).

### III. God's Wills Toward the Scope of Salvation

I now will move to the last major portion of this essay that deals with the question of God's seemingly contradictory wills toward the scope of salvation. As noted in the introduction earlier, both Calvinists and Arminians must account for how an omnipotent God can will that everyone be saved and yet ultimately save only some. This dilemma is again most apparent for Calvinists, who believe that God unconditionally elects to save only a portion of humanity. The question then arises how God can be said to truly will the salvation of all people if he takes unilateral steps to provide for the salvation of only some. For their part, some Calvinists have countered that the Arminian conception of God is too weak, positing as it does a God who wills all to be saved but who appears unable to bring about this outcome. How can God truly be considered God, they argue, if his will to save is not efficacious--if it can be thwarted as the Arminians contend?

#### A. The Logical Question Regarding the Scope of Salvation

This question of God's wills toward the scope of salvation, like the question of God's wills toward human evil, can be approached from both a logical perspective as well as a moral perspective. Often, Arminians charge Calvinists with entertaining a *logical* contradiction between God's decretive and preceptive (or moral) wills in this regard. Randall Basinger, for example, asks:

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“Just what is the relationship between God’s two wills [i.e., within Calvinism]? They seem to be at cross purposes. For example, his moral will is that all be saved. Yet his sovereign will is that not all be saved. What is the *real* will of God? Obviously it must be the sovereign will, because this is what God ultimately brings about. But what then of the moral will? In what sense is it real; to what extent does it reveal something about God? The Calvinist appears to face an unresolvable dilemma. If God’s moral will represents what God really wants to happen, then human sin really thwarts God’s will. But then God is not sovereign. On the other hand, if God is sovereign, then the human will cannot be outside of the divine will. But then how can it be true that God really does not want humans to sin?” (“Exhaustive Divine Sovereignty: A Practical Critique,” in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, ed. by Clark H. Pinnock, Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1989, pp. 201-202)

Basinger’s confusion here arises from his insistence that there be only one “real” will of God, an insistence which in turn arises from a failure to recognize that rationale agents can simultaneously hold multiple wills. As was noted earlier, it is possible for me to at once both want and not want to spank my child, or for General Washington to both want and not want to sign the death warrant for a traitor. Though this tension between multiple wills may be difficult to characterize, it will not help to deny its existence. This is especially the case in view of the fact that, as noted earlier, Arminians themselves must recognize multiple wills in God, as when God works to bring about the commission of human sin in exceptional cases (the “specific decree”) despite the fact that such sin is proscribed by God’s own moral law (see Section II.B above), or as when God wills for all to be saved and yet clearly does not will to exercise his omnipotence in such a way as to bring about this result.

Both Arminians and Calvinists, then, must recognize that it is *logically* possible for God to hold multiple wills in tension.<sup>9</sup> This is true in regard to God’s wills toward the scope of salvation just as it was true in regard to God’s wills toward the existence of human sin. In Section II.C above I proposed a resolution to the logical paradox of God’s multiple wills toward human sin, suggesting that in such cases God’s permissive will is never simply a desire *that man sin*, but instead it is always a desire *that man’s sin achieve the greater good* (which, according to the Arminian understanding outlined earlier, is the preservation of significant human freedom and significant relationships in the general case, or some particular greater good in specific cases). There is thus no contradiction

between this statement of God's permissive will and the complementary preceptive will of God *that man not sin*. Similarly, in the case of God's will toward the scope of human salvation we can resolve the logical paradox by drawing on the notion of a greater good. That is, we may say (to put it in Arminian terms) that God never wills simply *that a given person not be saved*, but instead he wills only *that a person not be saved apart from the (significantly) free exercise of that person's will to have faith in Christ*. Stated this way, there is no logical contradiction between this will of God and his additional will *that all people be saved*. The latter will is merely contingent upon (or subordinate to) the former will, in view of the greater-good status of significant human freedom and significant relationships. As before in the case of God's wills toward human sin, it seems to me that Calvinists may have difficulty applying a parallel greater-good solution to the logical paradox concerning God's wills toward the scope of human salvation, given that the greater good to which Calvinists typically appeal (i.e., the magnification of God's glory through the display of his wrath and mercy) depends on notions of wrath and mercy that are without sufficient foundations given the Calvinist understanding of human freedom (see Section II.C above and my essay "Philosophical Reflections on Free Will").

## **B. The Moral Question Regarding the Scope of Salvation**

It is, however, in reference to the moral dimension of God's wills toward the scope of salvation that the inadequacies of Calvinism vis-à-vis Arminianism are more clearly seen. The moral question concerns whether God can remain *morally upright* if he on the one hand wills that all people be saved and yet (in perhaps a complementary or subordinate sense) on the other hand wills that only some people ultimately experience salvation. Is God really being fair, just, honest, and loving toward humans to exercise his will(s) in this way? As was the case with the moral question regarding God's wills toward human evil, both Calvinists and Arminians typically respond to the moral question regarding God's wills toward human salvation by appealing to some notion of a greater good. Not surprisingly, the answers to the moral question in regard to the scope of salvation closely mirror the answers given earlier in regard to human evil. John Piper represents the standard Calvinist position when he argues that God genuinely and with good intention wills that all people be saved, but that he wills even more so the magnification of his own glory through the display of his wrath and mercy in the unconditional election of some individuals to salvation and of others to damnation ("Are There Two Wills in God?" in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, Thomas R. Schreiner & Bruce A. Ware (Eds.), Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995, 2000, pp.

107-131). The result within Calvinism is that only the (unconditionally) elect are ultimately saved. Arminians in their turn argue that God genuinely and forthrightly wills that all people be saved, and yet this will is conditioned on the greater good of the preservation of significant human free will and the significant relationships between God and man (and among men) that it makes possible. The result is that only those who freely choose to accept God's offer of salvation will ultimately be saved.

## **1. Assessing the Calvinist Response**

Do these responses to the moral question make sense? Considering first the Calvinist response more closely, we are compelled to ask the following: Granted that God desired to magnify his glory through the display of his wrath and mercy, why is it morally necessary that he unconditionally decree the majority of the human race to eternal damnation in order to achieve this?<sup>10</sup> Could not this same goal (the magnification of his glory through the display of mercy and wrath) be attained within the Arminian worldview as well? As I argued earlier (Section II.B), a God who preserves significant human freedom still has ample opportunity to display his wrath and mercy upon the human race, as indeed Arminians interpret the actual world to demonstrate (Arminius seems to have recognized this point; see *The Works of James Arminius*, London Edition, Vol. I, trans. James Nichols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986, p.655). This goal can be attained within the Arminian worldview without unilateral action on God's part in the form of an unconditional individual election, and without sacrificing significant human freedom and the significant relationships made possible by it. If the Calvinist regroups and argues that it is instead the display of God's sovereign right to unilaterally determine the destiny of his creation (rather than the display of his wrath and mercy per se) that achieves the greater good of magnifying his glory within the Calvinist worldview, then (as in Section II.B) I would argue to the contrary that the Bible does not ground God's glory in the exercise of unilateral action, but rather in the merits of his incomparable moral nature (see my essay "Does Arminianism Diminish God's Glory?"). Unless the Calvinist can come up with some other greater good by which to justify God's will to unconditionally elect only some to salvation, then, it appears that Calvinism presents a conjunction of wills within God (i.e., his will that all be saved and his will to elect only some to salvation) that remains morally suspect.

Moreover, it can be argued that to the extent the Calvinist doctrine of unconditional particular election grounds that election in an eternal decree of God rather than in the

person and redemptive acts of Jesus Christ (our election is “in Christ,” Ephesians 1:4), to that extent it actually *detracts* from the glory of God, because it is Christ himself who is the very “radiance of God’s glory” (Hebrews 1:3; also 2 Corinthians 4:6). As William MacDonald says, commenting on the repetition of the phrase “in Christ” in Ephesians 1:3-14, “One must not talk about election without mentioning Christ in every breath—not mechanically—but in recognition of the truth that there is not a chance of being chosen outside of him” (“The Biblical Doctrine of Election,” in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock, Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1989, p. 222). Robert Shank argues at some length in his book *Elect in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Election* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1970, 1989) that Calvinism indeed diminishes the centrality of Christ in election. Commenting on the Calvinist Canons of Dort, Shank states: “Here Christ is not the ground of election, and the election becomes *in abstractio*, for the choosing stands as a thing apart and prior to the Cross, with Christ and His act of atonement merely an accessory after the fact. . . . In such a view as Calvin’s and Dort’s, Christ is not the *fundamentum* of election that the Scriptures declare Him to be” (p. 67). Shank likewise notes that election in Calvin’s view “proceeds exclusively from a determinant decree prior to creation, in which case the ‘decision’ in Gethsemane [see Matthew 26:52-54] was *not* a decision and the whole redemptive career of Christ becomes symbolic rather than authentic” (pp. 66-67). In a related vein, MacDonald warns against inverting God’s grace and his will “so as to make the doctrine of grace subordinate to election. . . . Attempts to make [unconditional] individualistic election the absolute of a theological system finally succeed in doing so by backing away from the contingencies of grace for the certainties of decrees that people are helpless against. God’s love for the whole world is then called into question, and it becomes easy to conceive of him as a potentate like the Muslim God, who loves most to impose his will, and *whose identity and image are conceptualized totally apart from Christ*” (William G. MacDonald, “The Biblical Doctrine of Election,” in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock, Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1989, pp. 224-225, emphasis added).<sup>11</sup> Instead of the Calvinist doctrine of unconditional particular election, both MacDonald and Shank espouse a conditional corporate view of election (I will discuss this concept momentarily), which allows the election of God to be firmly grounded in the person of Christ.

Arminius raised the same objection to Calvinism’s emphasis on an unconditional election, specifically as it is expressed in the supralapsarian Calvinist view: “This doctrine is highly dishonourable to Jesus Christ our Saviour. For, (1.) it entirely excludes him from

that decree of predestination which predestinates the end: and it affirms, that men were predestinated to be saved, before Christ was predestinated to save them; and thus it argues, that *he is not the foundation of election*. (2.) It denies, that Christ is the meritorious cause, that again obtained for us the salvation which we had lost, by placing him as *only a subordinate cause* of that salvation which had been already foreordained, and thus only a minister and instrument to apply that salvation unto us. This indeed is in evident congruity with the [supralapsarian Calvinist] opinion which states, ‘that God has absolutely willed the salvation of certain men, by the first and supreme decree which he passed, and on which all his other decrees depend and are consequent:’ If this be true, it was therefore impossible for the salvation of such men to have been lost, and therefore unnecessary for it to be repaired and in some sort regained afresh, and discovered, by the merit of Christ, who was fore-ordained a Saviour for them alone” (“A Declaration of the Sentiments of Arminius,” *The Works of James Arminius*, London Edition, Vol. I, trans. James Nichols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986, pp. 630-631, *sic*; see also Vol. III, “Examination of Perkin’s Pamphlet,” p. 303).

In view of these observations, we may conclude that not only does Calvinism fail to provide a valid “greater good” that might justify God’s choice to elect only a portion of humanity to salvation (see my first objection above), but that Calvinism’s emphasis on unconditional particular election also has the effect of shifting the ground of election away from Christ and to a timeless decree lacking any clear relation to the person and work of Christ or to the grace of God *as it is revealed in Christ*. In view of the fact that Christ is “the radiance of God’s glory” (Hebrews 1:3), such an understanding of election runs the risk of actually detracting from the glory of God.<sup>12</sup>

Calvinism’s emphasis on election as being grounded in the eternal determinative decree of God risks having a similar diminishing effect on the concept of faith. Faith receives a strong emphasis in the Bible as being a central component to salvation, *the* central component from the standpoint of human involvement in the process of salvation (Luke 18:8; Acts 20:21; Romans 1:17; 3:28,31; Romans chp 4; 2 Corinthians 5:7; Galatians 2:20; 3:22,26; 5:6; 1 Timothy 1:4; 6:12; Hebrews 10:38; Hebrews chp 11; 1 John 5:4). Indeed, often the Bible refers to the whole of Christian religion and practice simply as “the faith” (e.g., Acts 6:7; Galatians 1:23; Philippians 1:25; 1 Timothy 1:2). Within a monergistic system such as Calvinism, however, in which all human involvement in salvation is absolutely determined by the inexorable divine decree, faith is no longer a significant free act but instead becomes to some extent incidental or symbolic. Granted

that Calvinists stress *sola fide*, my point here is simply that the looming priority of the all-determining decree within Calvinism tends to diminish the significance and efficacy of all else within the system, not only the person and work of Christ himself (as noted above), but the role of faith as well. While some Calvinists may applaud this outcome (given that the decree is merely an expression of the absolute will of God, thus the will of God is magnified in this view), it is in my view questionable whether this perspective maintains the proper biblical balance.

There are, as well, other difficulties of a moral nature presented by the Calvinist claim that God wills a unilateral, unconditional particular election. One of the most important of these problems concerns the relationship of such an election to the *universal offer* of God to all mankind that they be saved. The universal extent of God's offer is evident in numerous passages (e.g., Isaiah 55:1,7; John 3:16; Revelation 22:17). As Jesus stated in Matthew 11:28, "Come to Me, *all* who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest." Does not an unconditional election undermine the truthfulness of this universal offer of salvation to all? How can God be said to honestly and forthrightly offer salvation to those to whom he has already decided not to give the ability to accept that offer? What content does such an offer really have for those to whom God refuses to grant repentance and faith? The conjunction of an unconditional election and a universal offer of salvation would appear to be a double-dealing on God's part at best.<sup>13</sup>

It will not help the Calvinist in this regard to employ a compatibilist understanding of human free will and argue that God is dealing fairly and honestly with the nonelect because they do not *want* to accept God's offer of salvation. The content of the nonelect's desires matters little if those desires have themselves been decisively determined by the outworking of the decree of God. To better see this, imagine, for example, a first grade teacher who promises her charges that each will receive a special gift at the end of the school year. The gift that the teacher has in mind is the same for each student, and it is indeed a marvelous gift. The teacher, however, for reasons known only to her, has her favorites in the class. So then, each day during naptime as the students are all soundly snoozing on their floor mats, the teacher goes around and whispers in each ear, careful not to wake the students. To her favorite students she whispers, "You're going to love this gift I will give you; it is wonderful, fabulous, amazing!" To the other students she whispers, "You do not want this gift; it is yucky, awful, and will bring you great pain." This continues each day without the student's conscious awareness, until the final day of the school year arrives. The teacher stands

before the class with a large bag full of enticingly wrapped presents. She calls each student to the front and offers him or her one of the gifts. The power of her subliminal suggestions still ringing in the students' subconscious realms, each of the favored students consistently and enthusiastically accepts the gift, whereas each of the disfavored students consistently turns down the offer, choosing to return to his or her seat empty-handed. Now, despite the fact that each student chose exactly as he *wanted* to choose (the standard compatibilist defense), could it be said that the teacher has dealt honestly and straightforwardly with her students?

It seems to me that Calvinism places God in a similar position. We are taught within Calvinism that God unilaterally and unconditionally predetermines the eternal destiny of each person and (within compatibilist Calvinism) renders this predetermination certain by decisively conditioning each and every human desire. God thus conditions the desires of the nonelect so as to ensure that they will ultimately reject the gospel, and he conditions the desires of the elect so as to engender within them faith and repentance to salvation. This parallels the actions of the teacher in the above analogy, though of course the teacher's powers of subliminal persuasion were only relative, whereas God's ability to condition the desires of human agents is absolute. If anything, then, the analogy understates not overstates the moral predicament in which Calvinism seems to place God. How can his universal offer of salvation be considered morally legitimate if God decisively conditions the nonelect to uniformly reject this very same offer?

The problem being dealt with here concerns not so much God's right to unilaterally and unconditionally elect only some to salvation, but instead the *conjunction* of this hypothesized limited election with a *universal offer* of salvation. Even if we were to grant Calvinism a legitimate appeal to the greater good of God's glory as justification for his willing an unconditional non-universal election (something I am not ready to grant, for reasons stated earlier), the same sort of reasoning would not be available to justify God's issuing of a universal offer (sometimes referred to as the external call) to salvation. That is, there appears to be no *compelling* reason for God to have extended this offer or call *universally*.<sup>14</sup> God could just as effectively have displayed his unilateral right to elect whom he chooses (thereby magnifying his glory, given Calvinist assumptions) without having made a universal offer of salvation, either by making his external call and his unconditional election coextensive, or at the very least by changing the external presentation of the offer from the easily misunderstood "whoever will" (John 3:16) to a clear "*only the elect can*." In that way, there would have been no question or

appearance of double-dealing on God's part.

To this one might object, as Reformed theologian Louis Berkhof does, that God's external call or offer of salvation "must necessarily be general or universal, since no man can point out the elect" (*Systematic Theology: New Edition*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996, p. 463). This does not necessarily follow, however. One can readily imagine a world, for example, in which there would have been no need of a Great Commission; instead, God could in each generation have mysteriously drawn all of his elect to a given geographical center where the truths of the gospel would be given to them and only to them. Various similar arrangements can be imagined as well. That such thinking may sound fanciful is not the point. The point, rather, is that we are not free to assume that God could not have structured the dispensation of the gospel in some way other than he did. Perhaps the easiest alternative to imagine is that the offer of salvation could indeed have been extended universally, but reworded so as not to give the impression that all men are potential recipients of it. Instead of "whoever will," the Bible might instead have called men to first "test the waters" and find out strictly by experience whether or not they would be able to have faith and repentance. In this way the offer could remain tentative for any given individual who might hear it, without any promise of divine action that might appear conditioned on man's response. As it is, the Bible does *not* phrase the call to salvation in this way. This is yet one more reason to suspect Calvinism's assertion that God unilaterally conditions only some people to accept the universal offer of salvation.

The unilateral, unconditional election posited by Calvinists appears, then, to undermine the truthfulness of God's universal offer of salvation. Berkhof admitted "it need not be denied that there is a real difficulty at this point," but characterized it merely as "the difficulty with which we are always confronted, when we seek to harmonize the decretive and the preceptive will of God."<sup>15</sup> Identifying God's universal offer of salvation with his preceptive will, which only "informs [man] as to what is well pleasing in the sight of God," Berkhof then cautioned, "it should be borne in mind that God does not offer sinners the forgiveness of sins and eternal life unconditionally, but only in the way of faith and conversion; and that the righteousness of Christ, though not intended for all, is yet sufficient for all." (ibid., p.462).

What are we to make of this response? Berkhof's identification of the universal offer of salvation with God's preceptive will appears to be a move to recast the universal offer

merely as a statement of what God *would like to see happen* (i.e., if matters were determined by God to occur other than they really are), not *what God has any intentions of actually bringing about* in the case of the nonelect (i.e., in the world as it really is, in which most people are in fact not numbered among the elect). In this way, the universal offer becomes less of a *promise* per se and more of a *wish statement* on God's part. More importantly, Berkhof's reminder that the offer of salvation is conditional in nature seems to be an effort to argue that though it may appear to the uninformed that God is making a false offer of salvation to the nonelect, he is in actuality not *really* lying to them. This is so because it is still true that *if* matters were such that they would have faith and convert, *then* God would of course save them. One cannot blame God (so the argument goes) for what is left unsaid here, namely, that he does not and never did in fact intend to give the nonelect the gifts of faith and repentance, nor does he actually intend (nor did he ever intend) Christ's righteousness to be credited to their account.

This is an exceedingly disappointing answer on Berkhof's part. It attributes to God a rationalization for his actions that has all the ring of the words of a dubious politician: "I did not, *technically speaking*, lie." The fact raised by Berkhof that the nonelect do not meet the conditions for salvation is beside the point, for the universal offer of salvation as it is phrased in Scripture ("whoever will") would certainly lead an impartial observer to believe that it is at least *possible* for any recipient of the offer to meet the conditions (faith and repentance) attached to that offer. To argue that this does not *technically* amount to a false offer on God's part misses the point: It certainly gives every *appearance* of meaning something the Calvinist is forced to say that it does *not* in fact mean. Such an offer, therefore, would be unbecoming of a God who exhorts his people to "abstain from all appearance of evil" (1 Thessalonians 5:22, KJV).

Berkhof goes on to argue that though to some in may look "like mockery" for God to ask man to believe and repent when God knows that man is by nature unable to do so, this is not really so, for "in the last analysis man's inability in spiritual things is rooted in his unwillingness to serve God. The actual condition of things is not such that many would like to repent and believe in Christ, if they only could. All those who do not believe are not willing to believe, John 5:40" (ibid, pp. 462-463). Berkhof's appeal here to man's will as the cause of his spiritual inability is unexpected, to say the least, and would sound much more natural coming from an Arminian than from a Calvinist. Whereas the Arminian could indeed stop the statement at that point as Berkhof does (i.e., "man's inability in spiritual things is rooted in his unwillingness to serve God"), the consistent

Calvinist should be forced to complete the statement: “Man’s inability in spiritual things is rooted in his unwillingness to serve God, and man’s unwillingness to serve God *is rooted in the unilateral, unconditional decree of God*, by which *God chooses* that man not be willing to serve God and by which *God intends* not to grant to nonelect man the gifts of faith and repentance.” By taking the focus off of God and pointing to man’s will as the critical factor in the discussion, Berkhof has attempted to minimize the fact that the same God who makes the universal offer of salvation is the same God (according to Calvinists) who decretively wills all events (including all human choices) to occur exactly as they do and who wills to not make it possible for the majority of humanity to accept his universal offer of salvation. The fact is, however, that this tension between the universal offer and Calvinism’s limited, unconditional election is a glaring deficiency within the Calvinist system and should be recognized as such.<sup>16</sup>

A final objection to Calvinists’ handling of the moral question of God’s will(s) toward the scope of salvation has to do with the moral implications of the proposed unilateral, unconditional election itself. As even Martin Luther (who himself held firmly to an unconditional election) candidly admitted, there is something chilling in the notion that God unconditionally picks one person for salvation and leaves another to face damnation, without any prior consideration whatsoever of factors within the two men that might differentiate them.

“Doubtless it gives the greatest possible offence to common sense or natural reason, that God, Who is proclaimed as being full of mercy and goodness, and so on, should of His own mere will abandon, harden, and damn men, as though He delighted in the sins and great eternal torments of such poor wretches. It seems an iniquitous, cruel, intolerable thought to think of God; and it is this that has been a stumbling block to so many great men down the ages. And who would not stumble at it? I have stumbled at it myself more than once, down to the deepest pit of despair, so that I wished I had never been made a man.” (Martin Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer & O. R. Johnston, Revell, 1957, p. 217)

Again, the question here does not concern the logical possibility of God willing such a situation, or even his right or authority as Creator to do so. Instead, the question here is the appropriateness of God’s doing so *in view of his own moral nature*. Does this unconditional election contradict what we know to be revealed in Scripture of the nature of God, of his love toward those whom he has created?

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Luther, along with Calvin and many Reformed theologians since (e.g., Gordon H. Clark), answered this question in the negative by appealing to the absolute notion that whatever God wills is right simply because God wills it. In Luther's words:

“God is He for Whose will no cause or ground may be laid down as its rule and standard; for nothing is on a level with it or above it, but it is itself the rule for all things. If any rule or standard, or cause or ground, existed for it, it could no longer be the will of God. What God wills is not right because He ought, or was bound, so to will; on the contrary, what takes place must be right, because he so wills it.” (Martin Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer & O. R. Johnston, Revell, 1957, p. 209)

Calvin similarly comments:

“God's will is so much the highest rule of righteousness that whatever he wills, by the very fact that he wills it, must be considered righteous.” (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961, 3.23.2)

There are, I believe, cogent arguments against this position, several of which are summarized in Jerry Walls' excellent essay “Divine Commands, Predestination, and Moral Intuition” (in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock, Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1989, 1995, pp. 261-276). Most importantly, the position espoused by Luther and Calvin above cannot account for the various passages in Scripture that teach us that there are some things that God *cannot morally do*. God cannot lie, for example (Hebrews 6:18), nor can he “deny himself” (2 Timothy 2:13). If it were really true that “no cause or ground may be laid down as . . . [the] rule and standard” for God's will, as Luther asserted, then there would be no reason why God *could not* in fact lie or deny himself and yet remain morally upright. What would prevent the raw exercise of his will in this manner? The truth is, however, that God is not free to exercise his will in an arbitrary, completely unrestrained manner. A second look at 2 Timothy 2:13 gives us an important clue why this should be so: He cannot *deny himself*. Within the context of 2 Timothy 2:11-13, the meaning of this phrase is clear, namely, that God must be *faithful to his own moral character*; he cannot violate *his own nature*. As Robert Shank states it, “God is governed in His actions, not by the judgment of His creatures, but by the moral integrity of His own Person” and “by moral

principles inherent in His own holy character” (*Elect in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Election*, Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1970, 1989, p.119). It is against the moral nature of God to lie, for example; therefore, he is constrained by this nature in the exercise of his will, such that he consistently chooses not to lie.

In this vein, it has often (and I believe rightly) been argued by Arminians that it is against what we know of God’s moral nature as revealed in Scripture that he would unconditionally elect some to salvation and others to damnation, apart from any prior consideration of their response to God. I have already argued above in this regard that the doctrine of unconditional election when combined with a universal offer of salvation undermines God’s truthfulness (i.e., it goes against the assertion just noted in Hebrews 6:18 that “it is impossible for God to lie”). Similarly, it has been argued that the doctrine of unconditional election clashes sharply with the Bible’s account of God’s love and goodness. As John Wesley stated (quoting Psalm 145:9), “Nothing is more sure, than that as ‘the Lord is loving to every man,’ so ‘his mercy is over all his works’” (John Wesley, *Works* 1872; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979, 6:241). Jerry Walls pulls together Wesley’s thoughts on the matter: “Love is the ‘attribute which God peculiarly claims, wherein he glories above all the rest.’ But the whole notion of love is utterly perverted if it is held that a loving God unconditionally damns some persons. ‘Is not this such love as makes your blood run cold? . . . Can you think, that the loving, the merciful God, ever dealt thus with any soul which he hath made?’” (Jerry Walls, “Divine Commands, Predestination, and Moral Intuition,” in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, ed. Clark Pinnock, Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1989, 1995, p. 266; quoting John Wesley, *Works*, 10:227, 229).

Closely related to this objection is the concern that an unconditional election of the sort envisioned by Calvinists casts doubt on God’s justice or fairness as one who is not a respecter of persons (Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11; Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 3:25; 1 Peter 1:17). The question for evangelicals is not whether God has a right to damn sinners (evangelical Arminians would readily agree that he does), but whether God would be just to choose to create a mass of sentient beings in his own image knowing that he will ultimately destroy them, while at the same time choosing *not* to destroy another group of such beings, all *without any consideration of differences between these two groups* (e.g., without any consideration of the fact that one group is comprised of all those who fail to have persevering faith in Christ, while those in the other group do possess such faith). Keep in mind that according to Calvinism God’s election is not conditioned in any way

on factors in man. As Berkouwer remarks, man must ultimately remain “completely passive in the process of conversion,” and there can be no “cause within men for their different reactions to the gospel” (G. C. Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, Translated by Hugo Bekker. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960, p. 34). All such factors as faith, repentance, and perseverance are viewed by Calvinists as gifts unconditionally granted by God *as a result of* God’s prior decree. They do not in any way condition the content of that decree. Many Arminians object that this view effectively makes God a respecter of persons, in violation of his moral nature as revealed in Scripture.<sup>17</sup>

Recognizing the way in which this doctrine of unconditional predestination grates on one’s sense of justice, Luther nonetheless defended the moral rightness of it by reassuring us that in the afterlife God’s ways will be vindicated and we will “in the light of glory” finally understand how God was just to decree damnation for the majority of mankind. Luther draws a parallel between this situation and the problem of evil. Just as in the “light of nature” we could not understand how the wicked may prosper, and yet in the “light of grace” we come to understand that there is an afterlife in which all such wrongs will be righted, so in the light of this present life we may not understand how God can be just to unconditionally damn the nonelect, yet in the later “light of glory” this paradox will be cleared up for us as well (*Bondage of the Will*, pp. 314-318).

Walls, however, questions the legitimacy of Luther’s analogy:

“The point of the analogy seems to be that the revelation of the afterlife provides us with new information that gives us a new perspective on the injustice apparently discerned by the ‘light of nature.’ In other words, we come to understand that the prosperity of the wicked in this life is not the final word. However, one’s salvation or damnation *is* the final word, so to speak. There is nothing beyond eternal salvation and damnation that can redress the seeming injustice of some simply being chosen for damnation. . . . We have no reason at all to hope [for example] that God might choose in the end to spare such persons, as he did Isaac, or raise them from the death of damnation to eternal life. . . . The seeming injustice is not such that we have any reason to hope it will eventually be rectified. The injustice is not merely on the surface but seems to be intractable, for damnation is the ultimate, irreparable tragedy” (Jerry Walls, “Divine Commands, Predestination, and Moral Intuition,” in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, pp. 273-274).

To summarize the problems presented by Calvinism's handling of the moral question regarding God's will toward the scope of salvation, we first saw that the standard Calvinist appeals to a greater good (i.e., the magnification of God's glory through the display of his mercy, wrath, justice, or sovereign right to unilateral determination) as a means of justifying God's unilateral unconditional election of only a portion of humanity are all dubious. This is so either because the appeal gains no advantage over its Arminian alternative (and at the added cost of a loss of significant human free will and significant relationships) or because, in the case of the supposed magnification of God's glory through his sovereign right to unilateral determination, the appeal rests on a shaky scriptural basis (as discussed at length in my essay "Does Arminianism Diminish God's Glory?"). Second, we saw that Calvinism's emphasis on unconditional particular election shifts the ground of election away from Christ and to a timeless decree lacking a clear relation to the person, work, and grace of Christ. Such an understanding of election runs the risk of actually detracting from the glory of God by detracting from the centrality of Christ, who is the "radiance of God's glory" (Hebrews 1:3). Third, I argued that faith risks becoming incidental or symbolic within a monergistic system in which all human involvement in salvation is absolutely determined by the divine decree. Fourth, I argued that the unilateral, unconditional decree of Calvinism undermines the integrity of the universal offer of salvation, casting doubt on God's honesty and forthrightness. Lastly, I argued that a unilateral, unconditional decree of this sort more generally calls into question God's love and fairness. In this regard I quoted a number of Arminian authors who argue that the exercise of God's will cannot be in conflict with his own moral attributes as revealed in Scripture. I also noted doubt concerning the legitimacy of Luther's appeal to the "light of glory" as a means of resolving the paradox faced in this regard by Calvinist theologians.

## **2. Assessing the Arminian Response**

What then of the Arminian response to the moral question regarding God's will(s) toward the scope of salvation? Recall that the question concerns whether God can remain morally upright if he on the one hand wills that all people be saved and yet (in perhaps a complementary or subordinate sense) on the other hand wills that only some people ultimately experience salvation. Arminians generally respond by arguing that God genuinely wills all to be saved; however, he wills something else even greater, namely, the preservation of significant human free will so as to make possible significant relationships between God and man and among men. The result is that only those who

freely choose to accept God's offer of salvation will ultimately be saved.

This does not mean that Arminians reject the notion of election. Clearly the Bible teaches that God elects, and Arminians embrace this teaching, though there are several different lines of thought within Arminianism as to exactly how God's election is formulated. Arminius himself like Calvin held that God decrees which individuals will be saved; Arminius, however, believed that God bases his choice of who will be elected on his foreknowledge of who will respond in faith to the offer of salvation and persevere in that faith (e.g., "Nine Questions," *The Works of James Arminius*, London Edition, Vol. II, trans. James Nichols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986, Q. 1, p. 64). Thus, Arminius' conception of the divine decree was conditional (i.e. the content of the decree is conditioned on man's faith), in contrast to Calvin's unconditional decree. Many modern Arminians have moved away from the notion of an individual election based on a determinative decree altogether, and hold instead to a corporate understanding of election, according to which God does not elect individuals to salvation, but instead elects a *corporate body* contingently comprised of any and all who are "in Christ" through their faith in him. An individual can be considered as "elect(ed)," then, only in a contingent sense *in relation to Christ through faith in him*, who is the head of this corporate body. The corporate understanding of election is thus seen to be dynamic rather than static, and can be applied to no man *apart from a consideration of his present faith in Christ* (for an introduction to the notion of corporate election see William MacDonald's essay "The Biblical Doctrine of Election," in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock, Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1989, pp. 207-229).

I do not have space in this essay to deal with these differences among Arminians (or other differences that could be brought up as well). Instead, I only want to assess briefly whether the broad Arminian perspective is successful in addressing the moral question of God's will(s) toward the scope of salvation. Does it make sense to say that though God genuinely wants all people to be saved, he nonetheless permits as many as freely choose so to reject his sincere offer of salvation and thereby ensure their own damnation? Does such an arrangement place God in any moral dilemmas? I believe that this Arminian perspective does make sense, and that this understanding of God's will toward the scope of salvation best maintains God's integrity and uprightness as revealed in Scripture, and therefore best magnifies the glory of God.

Notice first that this Arminian perspective allows the ground of election to remain

squarely in Christ and his redemptive work instead of shifting the focus to an independent, timeless decree (cf. discussion in section III.B above). This is particularly evident in the corporate view of election, according to which one's status as "elect" can only be evaluated dynamically in regard to one's participation through faith in the corporate body of Christ. On this view there is no abstract decretive election of individuals standing somehow independent of or logically prior to Christ and his redemptive work for fallen humanity. Similarly, faith in Christ receives its proper biblical emphasis as a significant free act carrying authentic causal influence within the Arminian system, whereas faith risks becoming incidental or symbolic within a monergistic system in which all human involvement in salvation is absolutely determined by the divine decree. Moreover, within the Arminian system God's universal offer of salvation can only be taken as a sincere offer; there is no appearance of double-dealing or falsehood—God really will save any who freely put their faith in Christ. God does not work "behind the scenes" through decisive conditioning so as to unilaterally prevent most men who hear the gospel from accepting God's offer. Thus the integrity of God's offer of salvation is preserved. Similarly, the integrity of God's love and fairness is preserved, for God does not unconditionally pick one man over another or play "favorites" in regard to salvation without consideration of man's faith response to him. In all these respects, it seems to me that the Arminian perspective best preserves the proper biblical emphases and safeguards the moral integrity and the glory of God.

There is, however, a set of charges sometimes made against Arminians that touches on both the logical and moral questions concerning God's will toward the scope of salvation. The first charge is that Arminians posit irreconcilable wills in God when they say that God genuinely wills all men to be saved yet has no intention to bring about this state of affairs, but instead leaves the ultimate salvation of individuals up to the uncertain exercise of those individuals' free will. As Francis Turretin states: "Who would dare to attribute such wills to a man of sound mind, as to say that he willed seriously and ardently what he knew never would happen, and indeed would not happen because he nilled to effect it, on whom alone the effect depends?" (*Institutes of Elenctic Theology, Vol. 1: First Through Tenth Topics*, Trans. by George Giger, Ed. By James Dennison, Jr., Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992, p. 227).

Aside from the fact that Turretin assumes the very point he needs to prove (i.e., that God is the one "on whom alone the effect depends," thus ruling out from the start any significant agency for man), Turretin fails to recognize that, as was stated earlier, it is

quite possible for God as well as man to hold multiple wills in tension, genuinely willing that all men be saved and yet also willing that this state of affairs be accomplished only insofar as the greater good of significant human freedom and the significant relationships made possible by it can be preserved (cf. the discussion in Sections II.B and III.A above). Thus God wants all men to be saved, but he does not want any man to be *compelled* into this salvation, for to do so would negate the very nature of that salvation. As Arminius quoted Bernardus (*De Libero Arbit. Et Gratia*), “No one, except God, is able to bestow salvation; and nothing, except Free Will, is capable of receiving it” (“Public Disputations,” *The Works of James Arminius*, London Edition, Vol. II, trans. James Nichols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986, Disp. XI, p. 196). This fact becomes evident once we understand that salvation is not merely a state of affairs, a condition into which man may passively enter by the unilateral action of God. Instead, salvation is a *dynamic relationship* between God and man. As such, God desires that it be a *significant relationship*, and this is possible only if it is entered into freely and fostered by all parties concerned through the mutual exercise of significant freedom (i.e., contra-causal freedom; see Section II.B). The only way for this goal to be achieved was for God to create man with the same capacity for significant freedom enjoyed by God himself, this being a key aspect of the “image of God” in man. This creative decision by God necessarily entailed that many humans might freely choose to reject a significant relationship with God. As noted earlier, however, God apparently considered the significant relationships established with those who do freely receive Christ, along with the resulting magnification of God’s glory and grace, to be greater goods justifying his original creative decision.

A related charge often brought against Arminianism is that it posits an inefficacious, weak God who is unable to bring about his desires. Turretin, for example, argued that the very notion of a conditional will in God of the sort envisioned by Arminians “is deservedly rejected because it is unworthy of God as repugnant to his independence and wisdom and power (because it would remain doubtful and uncertain, viz., suspended on the mutable will of man and so ineffectual and frustrated, making God often to fail in his purpose)” (*Institutes of Elenctic Theology, Vol. 1: First Through Tenth Topics*, Trans. by George Giger, Ed. By James Dennison, Jr., Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992, Top. 3, Q. 16, XIX, p. 230). Elsewhere Turretin states, “It is absurd for the Creator to depend upon the creature, God upon man and the will of God (the first cause of all things) upon the things themselves. But this must be the case if the decrees of God are suspended on any condition in man” (ibid., Top. 4, Q. 3, IV, p. 317). Indeed, it

has often been argued that it would effectively diminish God's divinity if he were to condition his will on anything outside of himself. As Christopher Ness emphatically states, "A conditional decree makes a conditional God, and plainly *ungods* Him" (*An Antidote to Arminianism*, Millersville, PA: Classic-A-Month Books, 1964, pp. 14-15). Or, as Robert Reymond puts it, "from the very nature of the case the condition [for God's will] could not lie in the creature. If it did, the creature would be the determining agent in salvation and become thereby, for all intents and purposes, God" (Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1998, p. 371).

At issue here is what it means to say that God is "sovereign." Implied in all of the above quotes is the idea that for God to be truly sovereign he must always act unilaterally, without any external conditions impinging on his will (including those conditions arising from the exercise of human freedom). But is this true? Indeed, Reymond's quote above looks suspiciously circular in nature. It can be reduced, in effect, to the following argument: "God must completely determine man's salvation. Why? Because man cannot be allowed to determine his own salvation. Why not? Because man is not God, and only God can determine man's salvation." It is not hard to see from a comparison of the head and the tail of this argument that it assumes the very claim it purports to demonstrate, namely, that God's sovereignty entails that he unilaterally and unconditionally determine man's salvation.

The fact is that we need not make this assumption at all. There are other and better ways to view the divine sovereignty. I have dealt with this question at some length in the essay "Does Arminianism Diminish God's Glory?" One of the key points made there was that full sovereignty includes the divine right to self-limitation. As Jack Cottrell observes, God freely and sovereignly chose to create a world in which human beings have significant freedom of will, and he did so knowing that the exercise of this freedom on the part of humans would place limitations on the exercise of his own will, for he would be bound to respond to humans in ways compatible with his own nature. Such limitations on the exercise of God's will, however, "in no way contradict God's sovereignty, simply because they are *self*-limitations. . . . If they were limitations imposed on God from outside God, then his sovereignty would indeed be compromised. But they are *God's own choice*, and as such are not the negation of sovereignty but the very expression of it. The sovereign God is free to do as he pleases, and this includes the freedom to limit himself" (Jack W. Cottrell, "The Nature of the Divine Sovereignty," in

*The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, Clark Pinnock (Ed.), Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1989/1995, p. 110).

Another way of viewing this same truth is to see human freedom as a form of *delegated sovereignty*, the very expression or image of God's sovereignty reflected in man (Terry L. Miethe, "The Universal Power of the Atonement," in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, Pinnock (Ed.), Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1989, 1995, p. 74). It was God's desire to grant this measure of sovereignty or power of self-determination to man in order to make significant relationships between God and man and among men possible. This parallels the situation with other aspects of the image of God in man, for example, man's ability to communicate verbally, and his ability to reason. All such aspects of the divine image in man are necessary prerequisites for a significant divine-human relationship (and for significant human-human relationships). Significant human freedom is no exception; for, as argued earlier, significant relationships require that no one party determines (in an absolute sense) the participation of the other party (or parties) in the relationship. Though this power of self-determination that God has delegated to humans necessarily influences and even constrains the ways in which God chooses to exercise his own will, it in no way *contradicts* God's will, for being delegated to man, human freedom is (in its design) wholly derived from and reflective of the divine sovereignty. Thus, human freedom neither diminishes the divine glory nor accrues glory to itself, but rather *reflects glory back upon God, its source*.

It is not true, then, that by in part conditioning the exercise of his will on man's exercise of free will, God "often fails in his purpose," as Turretin claimed above. Man's free will is not a blight on God's plan and purpose for humanity; it is in fact *incorporated within* that plan. Indeed, the plan could not be accomplished without significant human freedom, inasmuch as God's goal is not to write a novel in which the decisions of we the characters are all scripted beforehand; instead, God's ultimate purpose for humanity is the establishment of a kingdom or family of humans under the headship of Christ engaged in authentically free relationships of love and holiness among themselves and with God who indwells them, all to the unending glory of God's righteousness and grace (Ephesians 1:4-10, 22-23; 2:14-22; 4:13-16).

Moreover, there is no need within an Arminian perspective to say that God's will ever "fails" or is "ineffectual" or "frustrated." Such terms would be appropriate only in a case in which God willed a certain goal or outcome (e.g., the salvation of a particular

individual) and moved to realize this goal or outcome but was effectively thwarted in the process, such that the goal or outcome did not materialize. Just what are God's goals, however? What does he will? We need to think carefully on this point in order to avoid confusion. I have argued throughout this essay that God's will is conditioned on the achievement of greater goods, one of the most pervasive being significant human freedom, because such freedom makes possible the significant relationships by which God's glory and grace are most intensely magnified. Thus, for example, God wills that all people participate in his salvation, but he does not will this in isolation from his will to preserve significant human freedom. As noted above, the "salvation" that God wills is not merely a state of affairs into which man may passively enter by the unilateral action of God. Instead, God's will or goal is that people enter into a dynamic, significant relationship with him. Because the achievement of this goal entails the exercise of significant free will on the part of man, God's will can never be said to have "failed" or to have been "ineffectual" or "frustrated" when a given person freely rejects God's offer of salvation. It was *never God's goal in the first place* that any person would be brought into the kingdom apart from the exercise of that person's own significantly free will, so there is no sense in which God can be charged with having failed to reach such a goal when a person freely rejects faith. Indeed, to the extent that salvation as a significant relationship presupposes significant (contra-causal) human freedom, to that extent it is not even *possible* for God to decisively determine one's salvation or otherwise compel one into salvation, for if God did so, the resulting "salvation" would be a pale shadow of the dynamic, significant relationship (i.e., biblical salvation) that God seeks with men.

What about Turretin's statement above that it would be absurd for "the will of God (the first cause of all things)" to depend "upon the things themselves"? Note that there is an ambiguity here in Turretin's claim that the will of God is "the first cause of all things." This phrase may be taken in two possible ways. First, we may take this phrase in an ontological sense to mean that it is by God's will that all things were created and have their being and are sustained. With this meaning I and other Arminians would heartily agree. However, taking the phrase in this ontological sense, it does not follow that the exercise of God's will may not be conditioned (in part) on the exercise of man's free will. Truly, man's free will (which is not, properly speaking, a "thing" at all but a *capacity*) exists in man only by God's design and intention. In this sense, the *fact* of man's free will is completely dependent on God, and this relation can in no way be reversed (i.e., the fact of God's free will is in no way dependent on man, for God possesses this capacity entirely of himself). However, the *choices* resulting from the exercise of man's free will

are not in the same sense uniformly dependent on God, but instead by definition depend critically on man's own free will. Of course, these choices can be informed by various circumstances and motivations, such that the choice is partially (or, in exceptional cases, decisively) conditioned by these circumstances and motivations. To the extent that God so orders these circumstances and motivations so as to persuade the human will to choose in one direction or another, to that extent the exercise of the human will can be said to depend on or be influenced by the exercise of God's will (see my discussion of divine "wooing" in the essay "Philosophical Reflections on Free Will"). But unless this conditioning is decisive (as it may be in exceptional cases), it cannot properly be said that man's choice depends on God's will in an *absolute* sense. Likewise, there is no sense in which the exercise of God's will is *absolutely* conditioned on the choices made by humans, but this does not rule out the possibility that the exercise of God's will may in some cases be influenced by the choices that humans make. As noted above, God may sovereignly choose to place self-limitations on the exercise of his free will (i.e., his will may be conditioned on man's choices), without these limitations contradicting his sovereignty, precisely because they are self-imposed by God. So then, while it is true that the *fact* of God's will cannot be conditioned in an ontological sense on the *fact* of man's will (a point with which Arminians agree), this does not entail any absurdity in the claim that *exercise* of God's will may be conditioned on the choices that flow from the *exercise* of human free will.

Alternatively, if we take Turretin's statement that the will of God is "the first cause of all things" not in an ontological sense but instead to mean that God unilaterally determines all events within time and space, including the decisions of men, then it turns out that Turretin has fallen prey to circularity. Obviously, if God's will is such that it unilaterally determines all the decisions and actions of men, then it must be the case that the exercise of God's will can in no sense be conditioned on the exercise of man's will, by definition. But this assertion that God unilaterally determines all things is the very point that needs to be proven by Calvinists. Hence, Turretin's objection when understood this way is circular and of itself demonstrates nothing.

I conclude, then, that the Arminian view of God's will(s) toward the scope of salvation is not damaged by the objections most commonly brought against it. Arminians do not posit irreconcilable wills in God when they say that God genuinely wills all men to be saved but chooses not to violate the exercise of significant human freedom to bring about man's salvation. Indeed, it would not even be *possible* for God to compel men into

salvation as most Arminians understand the concept in Scripture, because the salvation presented therein is not a static state but instead a dynamic relationship between God and man which presupposes the exercise of authentic human freedom. Nor is it true that Arminian thought leads to the conception of a “weak” or “inefficacious” God whose plans are constantly being “frustrated.” God’s will always has the preservation of significant human freedom in mind as a greater good, so his will can never be said to have been “frustrated” by the exercise of that same freedom. Moreover, I argued that Turretin was wrong to reason that God’s will cannot be conditioned on man’s will because God’s will is “the first cause of all things.” If one takes this phrase “first cause of all things” in an ontological sense, then it entails only that the *fact* of human free will is absolutely dependent on God’s will, not that the choices made in the *exercise* of human will are likewise dependent. Alternatively, if one takes Turretin’s phrase to mean that God’s will absolutely determines all events including human choices, then Turretin will be seen in this instance to have reasoned in a circle.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Given the length of this essay and the fact that I have throughout attempted to summarize the essential points at the end of each section, I will not here attempt a summary of the entire essay. Instead, let me just make two brief observations by way of conclusion.

First, we have seen that both Calvinists and Arminians must recognize that God may hold multiple and seemingly contradictory wills in tension in regard to his will(s) toward human evil and his will(s) toward the scope of salvation. It is not the case, as has sometimes been assumed, that only Calvinists face such a paradox (a point correctly noted by John Piper, “Are There Two Wills in God?” in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, Thomas R. Schreiner & Bruce A. Ware (Eds.), Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995, 2000, pp. 107-131). I have argued that the resolution to this problem, considered from a logical perspective, is that God’s will *that man sin or that a given man not be saved* (whether framed in Calvinist or Arminian terms) cannot be considered in isolation from his will that the relevant greater good be achieved (e.g., God wills that no man be saved apart from that man’s significantly free choice of faith and repentance).

Second, although both Calvinists and Arminians face the paradox of God’s seemingly contradictory wills, I have argued on a number of counts that the Arminian worldview

provides a more reasonable and satisfying response to this paradox. Perhaps the most important and far-reaching considerations in this regard have to do with how we conceptualize what it is that best magnifies the glory and beauty of God. Calvinists have tended to focus on God's right to make unilateral determinations as being the ground of his glory. I have argued in this essay and in the essay "Does Arminianism Diminish God's Glory?" that this Calvinist focus is misguided. A major omission in Calvinist theology is any recognition of the glory reflected back to God by man's exercise of significant free will. This is true both in the acts of obedience and sacrifice freely committed by believers (e.g., martyrdom) and in the development of free, significant relationships within the Body of Christ that are characterized by love and holiness. In all of this, the exercise of significant free will by humans is a reflection of the image of God in man, and the good fruits of that capacity in man redound to the greater glory of God himself. Similarly, I argued that the human relationship to God (like relationships among men) should be viewed as dynamic in nature rather than as a static state into which a person may be passively brought by God's unilateral determination. For God to unilaterally determine any man's participation in the salvation relationship would destroy the very nature and goal of salvation itself, which is that man will *freely* embrace his creator and *freely* grow into a corporate Body that reflects all the fullness of Christ, to the unending glory of God (Ephesians 1:5-6; 4:11-16).

## Notes:

1. Francis Turretin distinguished God's decretive and preceptive wills in this way:

"The former means that which God wills to do or permit himself; the latter what he wills that we should do. The former relates to the futuration and the event of things and is the rule of God's external acts; the latter is concerned with precepts and promises and is the rule of our action. The former cannot be resisted and is always fulfilled: 'Who hath resisted his will?' (Rom. 9:19). The latter is often violated by men: 'How often would I have gathered you together, and ye would not' (Mt. 23:37)." (Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology, Vol. 1: First Through Tenth Topics*, Trans. by George Giger, Ed. By James Dennison, Jr., Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992; Top. 3, Q. 15, II, p. 220).

However, it should be noted that only several pages after providing the above definitions, Turretin began working with an adjusted definition of the preceptive will based on the Scholastics' notion of the "will of sign." See the main text below for discussion.

2. One might protest that Turretin's definition here refers in the context of his discussion not to God's preceptive will but to the Scholastics' notion of the "will of sign." Note, however, that Turretin explicitly identified the will of sign with the preceptive will (*Institutes of Elenctic Theology, Vol. 1: First Through Tenth Topics*, Trans. by George Giger, Ed. By James Dennison, Jr., Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992; Top. 3, Q. 15, XV, p. 223); therefore, his assertions regarding the one apply to the other as well.

3. Arminius also taught a divine concurrence, "which is necessary to produce every act; because nothing whatever can have any entity except from the First and Chief Being, who immediately produces that entity." However, in Arminius' view this divine concurrence respects the integrity of human self-determination or free will, such that "God is at once the Effector and the Permitter of the same act, and the Permitter of it *before* He is the Effector. For if it had not been the will of the creature to perform such an act, the influx of God would not have been upon that act by Concurrence" ("Public Disputations," *The Works of James Arminius*, London Edition, Vol. II, trans. James Nichols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986, Disputation 10, IX, p. 183, emphasis added). This contrasts with the standard Calvinist understanding according to which "the divine concursus energizes man and *determines him efficaciously* to the specific act," in accordance with the divine decree (Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Combined edition with new preface), Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996, p. 175, emphasis added).

4. The concept of God's "permissive decree" has become a standard one within Calvinist/Reformed theology. Louis Berkhof, for example, relies heavily on the concept when discussing how God can ordain human sin without being considered the author of sin. Berkhof distinguishes between those things that God directly brings to pass and those things that he merely permits to come to pass:

"In the case of some things God decided, not merely that they would come to pass, but that He Himself would bring them to pass, either immediately, as in the work of creation, or through the mediation of secondary causes, which are continually energized by His power. He Himself assumes the responsibility for their coming to pass. There are

other things, however, which God included in His decree and thereby rendered certain, but which He did not decide to effectuate Himself, as the sinful acts of His rational creatures. The decree, in so far as it pertains to these acts, is generally called God's permissive decree. This name does not imply that the futurity of these acts is not certain to God, but simply that He permits them to come to pass by the free agency of His rational creatures. God assumes no responsibility for these sinful acts whatsoever." (Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Combined edition with new preface), Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996, p. 103)

"By His decree God rendered the sinful actions of man infallibly certain without deciding to effectuate them by acting immediately upon and in the finite will. This means that God does not positively work in man 'both to will and to do,' when man goes contrary to His revealed will. It should be carefully noted, however, that this permissive decree does not imply a passive permission of something which is not under the control of the divine will. It is a decree which renders the future sinful act absolutely certain, but in which God determines (a) not to hinder the sinful self-determination of the finite will; and (b) to regulate and control the result of this sinful self-determination" (ibid, p. 105)

The same problems attached to Turretin's formulation of God's permissive will apply to Berkhof's discussion as well. Berkhof's insistence that "God does not positively work in man 'both to will and to do,' when man goes contrary to His revealed will" notwithstanding, it is not at all clear how God can "render certain" human sinful acts without the extensive involvement of his exhaustive positive decree, as I have discussed in the main text above. Once God's positive decree is drawn back into an account of human evil, Calvinism finds itself facing again the same unresolved difficulty that motivated the appeal to a negative permissive decree in the first place.

Interestingly, in his desire to relieve God of the responsibility of man's sinful acts, Berkhof at one point comes dangerously close to compromising his Calvinist worldview. Responding to the objection that Calvinism's determinism makes God the author of sin, Berkhof protests that "the charge is not true; the decree merely makes God the author of free moral beings, who are themselves the authors of sin" (ibid, p. 108). To credit God with establishing the basis for human freedom, and then to emphasize the legitimacy of this freedom by considering these "free moral beings" as being "themselves the authors of sin" sounds suspiciously Arminian in outlook.

Berkhof continues: “God decrees to sustain their free agency, to regulate the circumstances of their life, and to permit that free agency to exert itself in a multitude of acts, of which some are sinful” (ibid, p. 108). The problem in all of this for Calvinism is that to speak of “free agency” being “permitted” to “exert itself” implies a prior initiation on man’s part that God in some sense neither causes nor withstands. But how can this be, given the Calvinist emphasis on God’s exhaustive, absolute decretive will? How are we to interpret this implied initiation on the part of man? As I have argued in the main text above, whatever impulse man supplies to the process has (given Calvinist assumptions) been prior conditioned and crafted by God via his exhaustive positive decree, such that it could not have occurred otherwise than it did (i.e., humans do not possess contra-causal freedom within the Calvinist perspective). How, then, can God be said from the Calvinist viewpoint to merely “permit” human sin?

5. A slightly different argument (but one which makes essentially the same point as mine here) against the Calvinist understanding of God’s permissive will is developed by Jack Cottrell, who argues that the notion of permissive will is “incompatible with an unconditional decree, simply because the very notion of permission is *conditional*; it is a reactive response. Although this is not necessarily the case regarding a general class of actions (‘I am allowing you to do whatever you please’), it is certainly true regarding specific acts. One in authority can allow a specific act to take place only if he foreknows it as planned and forthcoming, in which case the permission is a *response* to a plan or an intention known in advance. Now, for the Calvinist God’s permission is not general but specific, since it applies selectively to sins and not to good acts. Thus the permission of sin is very much a reaction to an anticipated human act. But as such it is inconsistent with God’s unconditional decree. So how can the decree be unconditional and permissive at the same time?” (“The Nature of the Divine Sovereignty,” in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock, Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1989, p. 105). Cottrell’s characterization of divine permission as a “response” makes essentially the same point as I have made in the main text above, namely, that there must be some positive initiation on the part of man to which God responds when God permits him to sin. The crucial questions are: “From what source does this positive initiation arise, and under what constraints?” As Cottrell’s discussion implies, given the Calvinist notion of an unconditional, exhaustive decree, the answer can only be that the positive initiation for man’s sin is ordered by God himself, in which context the inherently *conditional* concept of “permission” loses its meaning.

6. Plantinga distinguishes a Free Will Theodicy from a Free Will Defense as follows: a theodicy is an attempt “to tell us why God permits evil,” or “what God’s reason for permitting evil *really is*.” A Free Will Defense, in contrast, attempts only to explain “what God’s reason *might possibly be*” (*God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 28). That is, the aim of a Defense is merely to show that it is rational to believe that God has a reason for permitting the evil that exists in the world. The Free Will Defense does this by showing that the greater good made possible by the preservation of human free will provides one rational account (though not necessarily the only or the right account) for why God would permit evil. Whereas the Free Will Defense serves the broader philosophical purposes of Plantinga, most Arminian theologians do not stop simply with a defense as Plantinga defines it, but seek to develop a more complete theodicy by relating the Free Will Defense/Theodicy to Scripture and expanding on the reasons why the preservation of human freedom is of such importance to God (e.g., because it makes possible a significant relationship between God and humans; see my comments in the main text below).

7. There is some question among Arminians whether God *ever* decisively overrides human free will in a deterministic fashion, or whether he simply in some cases presents (or permits Satan to present) strong inducements for man to sin, but such inducements as do not absolutely remove or override the exercise of significant human free will. Arminius himself seems to have held the latter position. Arminius states that God’s permissive will toward human sin is founded on “the liberty of choosing, with which God formed his rational creature, and which his constancy does not suffer to be abolished, lest He should be accused of mutability” (“Public Disputations,” *The Works of James Arminius*, London Edition, Vol. II, trans. James Nichols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986, Disputation 9, XI, p. 167). Again, in discussing God’s reasons for providentially managing the incitement of humans to sin, Arminius states that “God manages them, in the first place, for the trial of his creature, and, afterwards, (*if it be the will of the creature to yield*.) for Himself to effect something by that act” (“Apology Against Thirty-One Theological Articles,” *ibid.*, Art. 23, p. 41, emphasis mine). It should be noted, however, that whereas Arminius taught that God never compels humans to sin in such a way that would override their free will, Arminius did believe that in some instances God may compel humans *not* to sin, by placing impediments to sin before the person “of such great efficacy as to render it impossible to be resisted” (“Public Disputations,” *ibid.*, Disputation 10, III, p. 178). It is not clear to me how this claim interacts with Arminius’ prior claim that any violation of man’s “liberty of choosing” would threaten the

immutability of God.

1 Corinthians 10:13 might be employed to support Arminius' position that God may seek to influence or try but never override human free will. This verse assures us that "God is faithful" to not allow us to be tempted "beyond what [we] are able," but will always manage the situation so that we will be "able to endure" the temptation without sinning. It is not clear, however, whether 1 Corinthians 10:13 is meant as a promise to all people or only to believers in Christ. If the latter, then it cannot be used to necessarily rule out the possibility that God would at times override the exercise of significant free will among the unregenerate. The interpretation of 1 Corinthians 10:13 in this regard hinges on to whom or what "God is faithful" in reference to managing temptations. Does the verse mean that he is faithful to his covenantal promises to man? If so, which of his covenants with man is in view? One possibility is God's original covenant with Adam (often termed the "Covenant of Works"), by which God promised eternal life as the reward for perfect obedience, but condemnation as the reward for disobedience. It might be argued that implicit in this covenant arrangement is the assumption that man's obedience or disobedience derives from the exercise of his significant free will, therefore God would be "unfaithful" to his portion in this covenant if he were to allow human free will ever to be overridden in order to bring about man's disobedience. Such an interpretation would then support Arminius' position above that God never overrides the exercise of free will in any man. Alternatively, one might argue that it is God's faithfulness to the Covenant of Grace in Jesus Christ that is in view in 1 Corinthians 10:13, according to which covenant God extends "every spiritual blessing" to those who are "in Christ" by faith (Ephesians 1:3). One of these spiritual blessings is freedom from the power of sin (Romans 6:14), to which the promise in 1 Corinthians 10:13 might be taken as a corollary. If so, then the promise here might be restricted to only believers in Christ. Or, it may be that the "faithfulness" of God in view in 1 Corinthians 10:13 is God's faithfulness to some aspect of his own nature or character (e.g., God's necessary immutability, as suggested above by Arminius) irrespective of any particular covenant, in which case the more likely interpretation is that God never overrides the free will of any person, regenerate or not.

I will not take any definite stand on this issue here, but will instead to simplify matters merely assume in my discussion that God may in fact override human free will in some cases. Apart from a consideration of 1 Corinthians 10:13, it seems to me that an appeal to a greater good makes it possible at least in theory for us to recognize exceptional cases

in which God absolutely overrides human free will and yet remains morally upright in doing so. The key question is whether there are times when some particular good in a given situation may be an even greater good than the preservation of significant human freedom. If so, then in that instance human freedom may justifiably be overridden for the achievement of that particular greater good (again, barring consideration of 1 Corinthians 10:13).

8. In one place Arminius appears to suggest a somewhat similar resolution to the paradox of God's conflicting wills toward human evil. Arminius states, "[W]hatever God permits, He permits it designedly and willingly,--*His Will being immediately occupied about its Permission, but His Permission itself is occupied about sin*; and this order cannot be inverted without great peril" ("Public Disputations," *The Works of James Arminius*, London Edition, Vol. II, trans. James Nichols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986, Disputation 9, XI, p. 168, emphasis mine). Arminius' point here seems to be that God does not so much will the sin itself as he wills to permit the sin. To the extent that God's permission is designed to bring about good ends, this formula bears some resemblance to the one I have presented in the main text.

9. Actually, Calvinists too, including Calvin himself, have often failed to recognize that God can hold multiple wills in tension. This failure drove Calvin to posit rather forced interpretations of a number of passages (e.g., 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9; John 3:16) in order to avoid the conclusion that God really desires the salvation of all people. Robert Shank provides a good summary in this regard (*Elect in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Election*, Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1970, 1989, pp. 91-99).

10. Many contemporary Calvinists have sought to move away from the notion of "double predestination" taught by Calvin and other early Calvinists, and instead suggest that God can unconditionally elect a portion of humanity to salvation without correspondingly unconditionally damning the rest of humanity. As Robert Shank observes, however, "the election of particular men constitutes no rejection of other men *only* if the election is not conditional. Any unconditional choice of particular men constitutes per se a rejection of all men not chosen" (*Elect in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Election*, Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1970, 1989, p. 173). The force of this observation is so obvious that it is hard to see how any unbiased observer could deny it.

11. Consider Fritz Guy's exhortation in this regard: "If Christian theology *really*

believes that Jesus the Messiah is the supreme revelation of God, that revelation ought to determine also its understanding of God's governance of the world. To the person who takes seriously Jesus' claim "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9) it is obvious that divine power is expressed not by decreeing and controlling (in the fashion of an ancient despot or a feudal lord), but by self-giving and enabling. A great but seldom-recognized irony here is that some Christians who have, in principle, a 'high christology' have nevertheless failed to let it guide their understanding of God" ("The Universality of God's Love," in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock, Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1989, pp. 33-34).

12. Francis Turretin (*Institutes of Elenctic Theology, Vol. 1: First Through Tenth Topics*, Trans. by George Giger, Ed. By James Dennison, Jr., Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992; Top. 4, Q. 10, pp. 350-355) and Louis Berkhof (*Systematic Theology* (Combined edition with new preface), Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996, p. 114) offer arguments as to why Christ is in fact not the ground of election. I do not have space to address these here (though I hope to do so in a future essay focusing on election). Suffice it say that their arguments are for the most part circular, assuming the very notion of a prior all-determining decree that needs to be demonstrated for their claim to succeed.

Some Calvinists appear to wish to argue instead that Christ *is* the foundation of election. F. H. Klooster, for example, states that "Christ is not merely a subsequent means to effectuate a decree of election; election is in Christ and through Christ. This is clearly expressed in the Canons of Dort: 'He has . . . chosen in Christ to salvation. . . . From eternity He has also appointed Christ to be the Mediator and Head of all the elect and the foundation of their salvation. Therefore He decreed to give to Christ those who were to be saved, and effectually to call and draw them into His fellowship through His word and Spirit' (I.7). Thus God's election is in Christ, and Christ is both the foundation of election and the foundation of salvation" ("Elect, Election," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1984, p. 349).

Notwithstanding Klooster's (and the Canons of Dort's) protestations to the contrary, there is nothing here in Klooster's discussion to establish *why* we should take seriously this claim that Christ can be considered the foundation of election within the Calvinist system, rather than "merely a subsequent means to effectuate a decree of election." Klooster asserts but does not demonstrate this claim, as a careful reading of the quotation will show. It is not enough for Klooster simply to quote the Scripture or the Canons of Dort

to the effect that we are elect “in Christ,” for this is the very point in question that needs to be demonstrated as being compatible with Calvinism. Nor is it enough to state that Christ is the “Mediator and Head of all the elect,” or that God “decreed to give to Christ” all of the elect. These observations at most help to establish that Christ is the foundation of *salvation*; they do not explain how he can properly be considered within Calvinism to be the foundation of an hypothesized unconditional election as well.

13. Robert Shank expresses it more strongly: “If God alone has the power to act to reverse men’s wayward course, if men can exercise no authentic personal decision for God and salvation, if men have no power of responding affirmatively to God apart from an immediate particular act of enabling which God in His sovereignty grants unconditionally to some and withholds from other, then in the case of every man who does not turn to Him, God’s appeals to men to ‘turn ye from your evil ways . . . turn you at my reproof . . . turn thou unto me . . . let the wicked forsake his way . . . let him return unto the Lord . . . seek ye the Lord . . . why will ye die?’ and all such appeals and admonitions constitute the most abhorrent, the most reprehensible, the most malicious and despicable deceptions that ever can be conceived, and God Himself constitutes the most abominable curse that ever can be visited on His own creation. ‘But Oh, thank God for God!’ Praise be to God for Himself . . . and for the *kind* of God He is! All His admonitions and invitations are offered in good faith, and there is not the slightest semblance of duplicity in any act or word of our God . . . for men are free to act, and there are valid alternatives before them, as the Gospel and all God’s gracious appeals and invitations imply. The general call to salvation is authentic, for men are free to respond affirmatively, if they will” (*Elect in the Son*, Minneapolis: MN, Bethany House, 1970, 1989, pp. 173-174).

14. Louis Berkhof (*Systematic Theology: New Edition*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996, p. 463) presents several reasons why God makes a universal offer of salvation even to the nonelect, one of which I will respond to momentarily in the main text. None of Berkhof’s other motivations for a universal offer (e.g., that it exhibits the righteousness of God’s judgments upon man’s sin), so far as I can see, are such that they can be achieved *exclusively* by a universal call. Consequently, they cannot function as compelling greater goods for the purpose of justifying a universal offer of salvation.

15. Of course, the “we” here can refer only to Calvinists, for, as we have seen earlier and will touch on again below, Arminians do not face this same problem of the decretive will.

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16. Berkhof raises one more defense for the legitimacy of a universal offer of salvation within a Calvinist framework, namely, that many of those “who oppose the general offer of salvation on the basis of man’s spiritual inability, do not hesitate to place the sinner before the demands of the law and even insist on doing this” (*Systematic Theology: New Edition*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996, p. 463). However, what Arminians object to is *not* the bare fact that God would obligate humans to do something that humans are presently incapable of doing in their own strength. Instead, Arminians object to the logical implication of Calvinism by which God obligates humans to do something (whether obedience to the law or faith/repentance for salvation) that they are incapable of doing, where this incapacity is due *ultimately to the unilateral decree of God* (not ultimately to the free exercise of man’s own will), and where God *unconditionally chooses to extend grace to some but not others to overcome this divinely-engendered incapacity*.

17. To this the Calvinist might respond that, be that as it may, the Bible clearly teaches that God *does* unilaterally and unconditionally elect some to salvation and others to reprobation. Perhaps the most common passage cited by Calvinists in support of this assertion is Romans chapter 9 (e.g., ‘it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy,’ vs. 16). A biblical exegesis of the relevant biblical material is far beyond the scope of the present essay; however, suffice it to say here that I believe Calvin and his theological heirs have critically misread Romans chapter nine. Paul clearly teaches an election in Romans that is conditioned on man’s faith. What Paul teaches in Romans 9 to be *unconditioned* by factors within man is God’s choice of if, when, and to whom he will extend a form of what Arminian theologians have traditionally called *prevenient grace*, which, broadly construed, refers to all those factors which God works within man and within man’s circumstances so as to give him the opportunity and ability to freely choose to exercise faith and repentance. For detailed discussion see my essay “Election in Romans Chapter Nine.”

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