

Calvinism and Problematic Readings of New Testament Texts
Or, Why I Am Not a Calvinist

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Theological determinism affirms that everything that happens does so because God has ordained it to happen that way.¹ Augustine introduced theological determinism into Christian theology, though theological determinism is more commonly identified with John Calvin and the tradition of Reformed theology that he initiated.² For many Calvinism is associated primarily with the doctrines of election and perseverance. Election is understood as God's selection of a subset of humanity for salvation and only those elected can respond to the Gospel. Those selected for salvation will necessarily persevere in the faith and therefore cannot commit apostasy. However Calvinism also affirms a theology of 'specific sovereignty', i.e. everything that happens does so because God has choreographed it to happen that way. As Peterson and Williams put it, God ordains everything down to 'the trajectory of the smallest raindrop'.³ Calvinism must deny that people have any free will ('libertarian freedom') as this would mean that choices could be made which run counter to what God has ordained for them at every moment. Instead Calvinists work with the concept of 'compatibilistic freedom', meaning that people will always willingly make the choices which God ordains that they make.

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

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

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

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

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

Parenthetical comment: Many Christians who think of themselves as Calvinists will protest my descriptions of Calvinist interpretations of New Testament texts and say that this is not what they believe. In effect they assume that in the daily outworking of the Christian life they have free will. However no Calvinist theologians take this view and they acknowledge that I am correctly representing the consequences of mainstream Calvinist theology for reading various types of material in the New Testament. Many Christians are ‘cafeteria Calvinists’, selectively embracing those ideas which they like, e.g. 1. that they are one of the privileged elect; 2. that they cannot lose their salvation; 3. as long as things are going well, that God has ordained all the good things that happen to them. However consistent Calvinist theology affirms much more than this and to that I now turn.

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

⁵ John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, J.K.S. Reid, trans. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, [1552]1961), 176-177. A theological axiom undergirding Calvinist theology is that God’s grace is always irresistible. This has a much broader application than the irresistible character of grace with respect salvation and perseverance. It applies to every moment of the life of every person, believer and unbeliever. If God wants a person to act in a morally righteous way then he will extend the necessary grace while if God wants the person to commit a specific sin then he will withhold the grace which would have enabled a righteous act. This position is a necessary deduction from the Calvinist view that God ordains everything that happens in human experience.

⁶ Jerry Walls and Joseph Dongell, *Why I Am Not A Calvinist* (Downers Grove/Leicester: IVP Press, 2004), is the single best critique of Calvinist theology. Cf. Roger Olson, ‘The Classical Free Will Theist Model of God’ in *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God*, 148-172, for an excellent summary of a theological framework that affirms libertarian freedom. As Olson points out, Arminian-Wesleyans do not believe that we have ‘absolute’ free will in that there are a range of forces that shape and influence our will: e.g. our sinful humanity; culture and our personal biography; the work of God in a person’s life (151).

Moral exhortations in the New Testament

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

If these exhortations are read within the framework of theological determinism, then the implication is that the extent of the believer's obedience is determined by what God has ordained for them at any moment, never by the person in their exercise of the gift of grace empowered libertarian freedom. Since God's grace is always 'irresistible', when Christians sin it is ultimately because God withheld the grace that would have enabled obedience.⁷ When Christians divorce their spouses, refuse to forgive, are self-centered, give in to temptation, bring shame on the Gospel, and abuse their wives or children, then the explanation must be that in these instances God has withheld the grace which would enable obedience to the moral exhortations of Scripture because he wanted these sins to be committed.⁸ It would appear that the positive function of moral exhortations is to inform believers what obedience will look like in those times when God ordains that they will be obedient. In those times when God withholds the grace that would enable obedience, the moral exhortations function as an indictment on the behavior which God ordains. The necessary implication is that God exhorts believers to obedience while simultaneously withholding the grace that would enable obedience in those situations where Christian obedience would result in outcomes which run counter to what God has determined should happen. Or, to put it another way, if Christian obedience resulted in an outcome that God did not ordain, e.g. that a marriage remain intact, then God would withhold the grace that would enable obedience, with the result that in this example he would render the divorce certain. These conclusions are necessary deductions from the Calvinist view that God

⁷ Terrance Tiessen, *Who Can Believe* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 230-258, makes a distinction between 'sufficient grace' and 'effective grace'. When applied to God's work in the life of the believer, 'effective grace' is for those times when obedience is the desired outcome. When God ordains that the believer sin, he only extends 'sufficient grace' so that the believer can be held accountable for their disobedience. However if God intentionally withholds the grace which would enable obedience so as to render the sin certain, it is problematic to call this 'sufficient grace'.

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

ordains everything that happens and that God's grace is always irresistible. As Williams and Peterson put it, 'God sovereignly directs and ordains...our **sinful acts** as well as the good that we do.'⁹

God's purposes for the believer

Closely related to the previous point are the frequent New Testament statements of the purposes or goals which God has for believers, e.g. believers are to bring God glory (Eph. 1.12), to do good works (Eph 2.9), to do what pleases God (Phil 2:13); to be holy (1 Thess. 4:3-7), to love God and others (Luke 10:27), to be conformed to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29).

Theological determinism requires that extent to which these purposes are realized in the life of individual believers and churches is determined entirely by God, never by the person in their exercise of the gift of grace empowered libertarian freedom. God is the one who determines the extent to which believers bring glory to God or do good works. When believers fail to love God and others it is because God has withheld the grace that would enable love. God is the one who determines the specific path for each person with respect to their progress in the Christian life and being 'conformed to the image of Christ'. When some Christians make no progress in spiritual development while other evidence significant growth, this can only be explained in terms of what God has ordained for each person with respect to their progress in the Christian life.

God's daily work in the life of the believer

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

There is a problem with interpreting these statements within the framework of compatibilistic freedom. How does one explain those times when believers are disobedient? The failure cannot be traced to the misuse of libertarian freedom. The problem must be that when believers sin it is because God did not extend sufficient grace 'to enable them to will and do what pleases God'.¹⁰

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

¹⁰ Peterson and Williams, *Not an Arminian*, xx, use Philippians 2:12-13 as a proof text to support a compatibilistic understanding of freedom. The necessary implication of this reading is that Paul in fact means that God is *sometimes* at work to enable us to will and to do what pleases him, i.e to do what is in alignment with his 'revealed will'. Philippians 2:12-13 would not be

To take a specific Pauline example, in 1 Cor. 10:13 Paul tells the Corinthians that when tempted, in this context to attend temple meals, God will provide the grace which will enable them to resist temptation (= 'a way out'). This makes sense on the assumption of libertarian freedom, i.e. grace is not irresistible and therefore believers must exercise their 'grace enabled libertarian freedom' to take 'the way out'. It is harder to make sense of this on the assumption of compatibilistic freedom. If God always extends the grace to resist the temptation to attend temple meals, why do some Christians fail to embrace that grace and resist temptation? The answer, for a Calvinist, must be that God ordained that the person succumb to temptation and attend temple meals. In these circumstances God simultaneously extends the grace to provide a 'way out of temptation' and ordains that the believer give in to temptation.

One way a theological determinist might rationalize this would be to argue that when tempted some Christians receive 'general grace' while others receive 'effectual grace'.¹¹ 'General grace' is for those situations when God ordains that believers do not resist temptation and therefore sin, 'effectual grace' is for those situations when God ordains that believers resist temptation and do not sin.

Critiques of the sins of believers

In many New Testament texts churches are rebuked for embracing sin and erroneous theological and ethical perspectives. The Corinthian epistles provide a glimpse into a church which had embraced a remarkable concentration of problematic positions, e.g. they wanted to marginalize the message of the Cross (1 Cor. 1:18), tried to demonize Paul using a variety of strategies (e.g. 2 Cor. 10), argued that there was no ethical objection to using prostitutes (1 Cor. 6:12-20), concluded that sex between believers was inappropriate (1 Cor. 7), advocated attending meals at pagan temples where drunkenness and sex with prostitutes was the norm (1 Cor. 8, 10:1-22), used tongues as a means of self-promotion (1 Cor. 12-14), allowed the Lord's Supper to be an occasion where the elites met early in the dining room to overeat and get drunk (1 Cor 11:17-33), and defined Christian leadership using Graeco-Roman cultural values such as rhetorical ability, a strong physical appearance, the ability to avoid suffering, and a willingness to engage in patronage relationships (2 Cor 10-13). In response to these and other problems Paul labored strenuously to try to correct their flawed perspectives. If Paul were a theological determinist then he believed: 1. that God choreographed each of these sins in the Corinthian church; 2. that God ordained all the specifics of Paul's response; 2. that whether or not the Corinthian church responded to Paul's appeals would be determined entirely by what God wanted to happen in

true in those instances when God had ordained that believers sin and therefore withheld the grace that would enable obedience, i.e. there are many times in the life of the believer when God is in fact not at work to enable us to will and do what pleases him.

¹¹ As Calvinists will recognize, this is a play on the Calvinist distinction between a 'general call' versus an 'effectual call'. When the Gospel is preached, those whom God has predestined to damnation hear it only as a 'general call' while the elect hear it as an 'effectual call', i.e. God enables them to respond.

Corinth so that if the Corinthian church was unresponsive it would ultimately be because God had ordained this outcome.¹²

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

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

Warnings to believers

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

In Revelation 14:9-13 believers are warned not to compromise with an Antichrist order when persecuted. Those who fail to heed this warning and deny their faith will come under eschatological judgment while those who remain faithful to the point of death will 'rest from their labor', i.e. will experience eschatological salvation. Elsewhere Revelation explicitly states that God extends the grace which will enable believers to remain faithful in a tribulation context (e.g. Rev. 7:1-8; 11:1-2). The language of Revelation 14:9-13 assumes that the believer can exercise their grace empowered libertarian freedom by choosing either to remain faithful or to

¹² Ezekiel 24:13 provides an illuminating O.T. parallel: 'You mix uncleanness with obscene conduct.¹⁴ **I tried to cleanse you,¹⁵ but you are not clean.** You will not be cleansed from your uncleanness¹⁶ until I have exhausted my anger on you.' On a Calvinist reading, God simultaneously tried to cleanse Israel and prevented them from being cleansed because he wanted to judge them. Cf. also Jeremiah 7:12-14.

deny their faith. However on Calvinist assumptions, God is the one who decided ‘before the foundation of the world’ how each believer would choose.

Well-intentioned differences among Christians

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

Statements about the Christian life

In Romans 5:3-4 Paul states that God uses adversity as a catalyst for the character development of a believer. The question is whether this statement is conditional in that believers must respond appropriately to difficult circumstances in order for it to be character building. Schreiner will argue that ultimately this is not conditional because God will always overcome the believer’s temptation to respond poorly to adversity.¹⁴ The unstated assumption is that when believers respond poorly to suffering, and adversity has an ultimately negative impact on their personal and spiritual formation, this is because God has ordained this situation. The character building function of adversity is now conditioned not upon how the person responds but on what God ordains for the person in any particular experience of adversity.

Paul understands that the Christian life is one where there is a tension between what God wants for us and desires rooted in our fallen humanity.¹⁵ In Rom. 7:14-25 Paul explores those times in the experience of the believer when ‘the flesh’ rather than ‘the Spirit’ wins. There are times when the believer wants to do what is right but instead does what they know is wrong. On the assumption of libertarian freedom, Paul is saying that there are times when in spite of the fact that in his grace God is at work to enable him ‘to will and to do’ what pleases God, Paul chooses

¹³ Down through the centuries Christians have differed on countless points of theology and Biblical interpretation. Theological determinism assumes that God ordained each and every concept, no matter how outrageous, erroneous and destructive. Furthermore God ordained all the conflicts and divisions within the church that resulted from these differences. It is impossible to reconcile this conclusion with Paul’s affirmation that ‘God is not a God of disorder but of peace’ (1 Cor. 14:33...the context being a statement about worship).

¹⁴ Schreiner, *Romans*, 256.

¹⁵ E.g., the conflict between the flesh and Spirit in Gal. 5:16-17.

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

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

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

In Matt. 18:16-17 Jesus speaks to a situation where a disciple refuses to repent of their sin when confronted. On a Calvinist reading, God is the one who ordains that the person be unresponsive to discipline.

Jesus states that God is responsive to the prayers of his people (e.g. Luke 11:5-13; 18:1-8). On the assumption of theological determinism, this could only be true if God choreographed the specifics of the believer's prayer so that they petitioned precisely what God had already determined would happen. God would 'respond' in the sense that there was a 1-1 correspondence between what was prayed and what transpired because God had ordained that it happen 'before the foundation of the world'. Once again this is a counterintuitive in that this is not how people understand the concept of God's responsiveness to prayer, was not how divine responsiveness to prayer was understood in contemporary Judaism, and there is no contextual evidence that this is how Jesus meant his words to be understood.¹⁶

A number of New Testament texts promise 'rewards' or 'blessing' for faithful discipleship and service (e.g. Matt. 6:4; 6, 18; 10:41-42; Lk. 6:35; 1 Cor. 3:8; 4:5; Gal. 6:19). The intent of these statements is to motivate believers to use their 'grace empowered libertarian freedom' in faithful discipleship. This idea is expressed broadly in 2 Cor. 5:10 where Paul says that each believer will stand before Christ and give an accounting of their discipleship. Each person will 'receive what is due them for the things done...whether good or evil.' On Calvinist assumptions, God

¹⁶ Cf. David Crump, *Knocking on Heaven's Door: A New Testament Theology of Petitionary Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 129-130, 289-291, critiques the Calvinist reading of petitionary prayer along similar lines. This is especially remarkable because he is Professor of Theology and Religion at Calvin Seminary.

has determined before the foundation of the world what will be true for each believer with respect to the quality of their discipleship and therefore the ‘rewards’ or ‘rebukes’ they will receive. God then uses these promises of reward as a catalyst for motivating obedience in those believers that he wants to bless. When God ordains that some believers will receive eschatological rebukes, the promises will not be a catalyst for motivating obedience and therefore the believer will receive their God ordained rebuke.¹⁷

Other New Testament texts

The Matthean version of the Lord’s prayer has the petition ‘your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’ (Matt. 6:10). The assumption behind the statement would appear to be that in the present age God’s will is not fully realized on earth in the same way that it is in heaven. This would appear to contradict the Calvinist assumption whatever happens in this age does so because God has ordained it and therefore his will is always done ‘on earth as it is in heaven’.¹⁸

If Jesus worked with a deterministic theology, then when he critiqued the failures of the Pharisees he would have done so with the realization that God ordained each of these sins (e.g. Matt 23:1-36). The same would be true of his words of judgment spoken with respect to unresponsive Galilean village (e.g. Matt. 11:20-24). After exploring options for understanding the reasons for Israel’s unbelief, Paul concludes in Rom. 10:23 that the real problem is stubborn disobedience in spite of the fact that from his side God has been continuously ‘holding out his hand’ to Israel. A Calvinist reading of this requires that God himself ordains the stubborn disobedience. Therefore he is ‘holding out his hand’ to Israel while simultaneously withholding the grace that would enable them to respond.¹⁹

The Biblical concept of ‘divine grief’ is inexplicable on the assumptions of theological determinism. The Gospels record Jesus’ grief over the unresponsiveness of Jerusalem and the people of God (e.g. Matt. 23:37-39). If Jesus were a theological determinist then he believed that God himself had ordained this unresponsiveness. But if God had choreographed this unbelief, why grieve over it?²⁰

¹⁷ For these promises of reward and rebuke to have a motivational function for most people, the hearer must read them on the assumption of libertarian freedom, i.e. it is within their power to make right or wrong choices that lead to these different outcomes. If Calvinists are right, then it seems to me that these statements are necessarily communicated within a misleading and even deceptive framework in order to be effective. I will restate this point in the concluding section.

¹⁸ The Calvinist solution is to distinguish God’s revealed moral will and his ‘secret ordaining will’. The latter is always done on earth. Thus the petition is a prayer that God’s revealed moral will would be done on earth.

¹⁹ Schreiner, *Romans*, 520, argues with respect to this text that God does simultaneously invite people into relationship while simultaneously withholding the grace which would enable them to respond.

²⁰ This is also problem for reading the Old Testament texts which portray God’s grief and anger over the sins of Israel with profound intensity (e.g. Jer. 13:15-17; Isa. 1:10-15). If God has ‘morally sufficient reasons’ to ordain the sins of his people, why would he grieve over the fact

Human expressions of moral outrage (e.g. Gal. 2:xx) are also problematic on the assumptions of theological determinism. Why be angry about realities which God has in fact ordained? On Calvinist assumptions, when believers are distressed at evil in the world and church, God has ordained that they express moral outrage about realities which God himself choreographed. God is also the one who decides whether an expression of moral outrage is a catalyst for correcting problems or an exercise in futility.

In my experience theological determinists do not normally try to explain the types of texts discussed to this point from the perspective of God's ordination of all things. However Calvinists commonly discuss New Testament texts which affirm God's universal salvific will and warn believers about apostasy. The question is whether the interpretations of these texts are plausible.

God's universal salvific will

The New Testament contains many affirmations that God desires the salvation of every person.²¹ These statements challenge the Calvinist understanding of election language as meaning that God unconditionally selects a subset of humanity for salvation and only these individuals can respond to the Gospel.²² Calvinist interpreters use a variety of strategies to deal with the texts stating that God desires that all be saved: 1. restricting the 'all' to 'all the elect'; 2. defining 'all' as 'all kinds of people' from every sector of society; 3. interpreting the intention as being that salvation is not just for the Jew but also the Gentile. Each of these interpretations are counterintuitive and lack any contextual support. Thomas Schreiner recognizes this and concedes that texts such as 2 Peter 3:9 do indeed affirm that God *desires* the salvation of every person. However he argues that while God does *desire* the salvation of all, he *ordains* to make salvation possible only for a limited number.²³ In addition to being a counter-intuitive way of reading the

that they are doing precisely what he has scripted for them? Sanders, *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God*, 142, points out that Augustine and Calvin were consistent on this point and argued that God is never grieved.

²¹ Matt. 22:14; Luke 2:10; John 1:7, 9, 29, 36; 3:16; 4:42; 5:23; 6:45; 11:48; 12:32; Acts 17:30; 22:14; Romans 5:15-19; 10:11-13; 11:32; 2 Cor. 5:19; Phil. 2:11; Col. 2:20; 1 Tim. 2:4; Titus 2:11; 2 Pet. 3:9; 1 John 2:2; Rev. 22:17. Cf. I. Howard Marshall, 'For all, for all my Saviour Died', in *Semper Reformandum: Studies in Honour of Clark H. Pinnock* (eds. Stanley Porter and Anthony Cross; Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), 322-346.

²² For a Calvinist understanding of election cf. e.g. Bruce Ware, 'Divine Election to Salvation: Unconditional, Individual, and Infralapsarian,' in *Perspectives on Election*, 1-58. For an understanding of election that gives full weight to God's universal salvific will and libertarian freedom cf. Glen Shellrude, *All are Elect, Few are Elect: Understanding New Testament Election Language*, publication forthcoming (in the meantime available from the author: Glen.Shellrude@nyack.edu)

²³ Thomas Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman, 2003), 380-383. Cf. also Ware, *Divine Election*, 32-35. John Piper, 'Are There Two Wills in God?', in *Still Sovereign*, 107-13, has developed the fullest defense of this construct. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 381-382, acknowledges that 'Many think this approach is double-talk and outright nonsense.' I would add that this interpretive approach is counterintuitive, contextually unsupported and ahistorical in that

relevant texts, it raises the logical question of why God would desire one thing but ordain something else.²⁴ To put it more starkly, why would God *desire* that all of humanity experience the glory of his presence for eternity but then choose to *ordain* that the majority of people experience the horror of eternal separation? And why in his self-revelation would he say that he desires that all be saved when he knows that he is going to ordain something completely different? And where is the contextual evidence that this is how the Jesus, John, Paul and Peter understood these affirmations of God's universal salvific will?

Warnings against apostasy

The New Testament contains numerous warnings against believers falling away and losing their salvation.²⁵ These texts are a problem for Calvinists since they affirm that apostasy is impossible for the elect.²⁶ However if this were true then why warn against it? Once again theological determinists must resort to counterintuitive and contextually unsupported interpretations which do not take account of the historical context in which the warnings were given.

The three main approaches to the warning texts used by Calvinist interpreters are: 1. the warnings have to do with the loss of rewards, not salvation; 2. the warnings have in view those who are not genuine believers; 3. the warnings are the means God uses to ensure that the elect do not commit apostasy. The first approach fails to take account of the contexts and language of the warnings. The problem with the second approach is that if the real problem is that some are deluded about being genuine believers, why not speak to that issue directly rather than address them as believers and warn them about the possibility of apostasy. The warnings should be about the danger of being self-deluded that one is a believer rather than about the danger of

there is no evidence that this is how these statements would have been read in a first century context.

²⁴ John Piper argues that God ordains both the damnation of the majority of humanity as well as the evil and carnage so pervasive in human experience for the express purpose of magnifying his glory in that these realities are necessary prerequisites for the elect to understand the depth of God's holiness, majesty and glory. For a critique of this construct along with a response from Piper cf. Thomas McCall, 'I Believe in Divine Sovereignty,' *Trinity Journal* 29NS (2008), 205-226; John Piper, 'I Believe in God's Self-Sufficiency: A Response to Thomas McCall,' *Trinity Journal* 29NS (2008), 227-234; Thomas McCall, 'We Believe in God's Sovereign Goodness: A Rejoinder to John Piper,' *Trinity Journal* 29NS (2008), 235-246.

²⁵ I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1969), is the best analysis of the relevant texts. Stephen Ashby, 'A Reformed Arminian View', in *Four Views on Eternal Security* (ed. J. Matthew Pinson; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 137-187, has an excellent, concise discussion of the issues (cf. 170-180 for a summary analysis of the Biblical texts). For a Calvinist perspective cf. Thomas Schreiner, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Falling Away* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2001).

²⁶ Theological determinism does not necessarily require 'eternal security'. Augustine believed that it was possible that a person could be truly regenerate and then fall way, the assumption being that God ordained that the person be a believer for a limited period of time. However since Calvin a theology of assured perseverance has been axiomatic in Calvinist theology.

apostasy. The problem with the third approach is that it requires the logically and ethically challenged assumption that God warns about something that could not happen as a means of ensuring that it doesn't happen. It calls in question the moral integrity of God that he would warn about something as though it were a real possibility when in fact this was not the case.

The bigger problem for all these approaches is that they fail to take account of the historical context in which the warnings about apostasy were spoken and written. Second Temple Judaism had no theology of the assured 'perseverance of the saints' and believed that apostasy was always a real possibility and danger. If Jesus and the early church took a different view of this issue then one would expect it to be clearly expressed. As the texts are written, the New Testament warnings about apostasy would have been understood by any 1st century hearer as assuming that it was a real possibility and danger to be avoided.²⁷

Seven concluding observations

First, there is a the lack of historical and contextual evidence that would validate interpreting the New Testament within the framework of theological determinism. There is no evidence that mainstream Second Temple Judaism embraced exhaustive theological determinism. If Jesus, Paul and other writers of the New Testament had a different view on this matter then one would expect this to be clearly expressed. In order to be understood correctly they would need to distinguish their theological framework from the traditional Jewish construct of reality which assumed libertarian freedom.²⁸ However there are no contextual indicators that they departed from Jewish thinking on this point and embraced comprehensive theological determinism.²⁹

²⁷ Calvinists claim that Scriptural affirmations of God being for us (e.g. John 10:27-30; Rom. 8:28-39) provide the contextual indicators that Jesus and the early church believed that apostasy was impossible. But these texts simply cannot mean what Calvinists want them to mean. These texts affirm that God is working to sustain the believer's perseverance and that nothing external to them can separate them from God's work on their behalf. However this does not mean that grace is irresistible and that the individual cannot choose to separate themselves from Christ. This is especially clear when the same texts which affirm that God is completely on the side of believers also warn against the possibility of apostasy (e.g. John 10:27-30 & 15:16; Rom. 8:28-39 & 8:13; 11:22). The Essene texts from Qumran also affirm that God is working to enable the perseverance of his people while simultaneously and explicitly affirming the possibility of apostasy (cf. I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, 38-43)

²⁸ The lack of evidence that either mainstream 2nd Temple Judaism or Jesus and the early church were theological determinists is an important consideration when considering Old Testament texts which Calvinists take as proof texts for theological determinism (e.g. Gen. 50:20; Exod. 8:15, 32; 9:12; 10:1; Deut. 32:39; Job 1:21; 2:10; Eccles. 7:14; Lam. 3:38; Prov. 16:9; 21:1; 1 Sam. 2:6-7; Isa. 45:7; Amos 3:6). If this was how the original authors intended their statements to be understood, then one would expect that this would be reflected in 2nd Temple Jewish literature or the New Testament. The lack of evidence for theological determinism in this literature suggests that neither 2nd Temple Jews or Jesus and the early church understood these Old Testament texts in the way that Calvinists propose. However the real problem for using these texts as Scriptural evidence for theological determinism is that when viewed in the total

Christians in the early centuries would have been familiar with a deterministic world view in light of the pervasive impact of Stoic philosophy. It is therefore remarkable no theologian, pastor or scholar in the early church prior to Augustine found theological determinism in the New Testament.³⁰ This is not what one would expect if the New Testament contained significant contextual indicators that the writers conceptualized reality within a deterministic theological framework.

Second, theological determinism conflicts with the natural, intuitive reading of so many Scriptural texts. A good hypothesis is one that accounts for the largest amount of data with the fewest number of residual challenges. It is not the case that reading the New Testament within the framework of theological determinism creates the occasional tension that may require a somewhat counterintuitive interpretation of scattered texts. The challenges are monumental in that a Calvinist reading requires counterintuitive and ahistorical interpretations of thousands of texts and many different kinds of material.

context of the OT, a Calvinist interpretive framework is contextually unsupported and results in counterintuitive and ahistorical readings of thousands of Old Testament texts and many different kinds of material (precisely the same problem as reading the N.T. within the framework of theological determinism). Crump, *Knocking on Heaven's Door*, p. 290-291, note 16, points out that the use Calvinist theologians make of these texts ignores the meaning of the texts in their original context. For an historically and contextually based interpretation of these texts cf. F. Lindstrom, *God and the Origin of Evil: A Contextual Analysis of Alleged Monistic Evidence in the Old Testament* (Lund: Gleerup, 1983).

²⁹ Romans 9:6-23 is the text most commonly cited by Calvinists to prove that Paul was a theological determinist. Statements like 'I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy' (9:15) and 'he has mercy on whom he wishes and hardens whom he wishes' (9:18) do sound like an expression of theological determinism. These statements must be read within the context of Paul's entire argument in Romans 9-11. Paul is responding to the twin objections that if the promises to Israel were indeed realized in Jesus then 1. God was under obligation to ensure that the covenant people recognized and responded to this reality and, 2. it would be wrong for God to allow Gentiles to be the primary beneficiaries of the promises to Israel. 29 In 9:6-23 Paul is arguing 1. that God has no obligation to turn up the heat of irresistible grace so that Israel will respond to what he does and as a result he is free to act in judgment towards Jews who spurn his grace; 2. that God is free to show mercy to responsive Gentiles, those who were not the primary recipients of Scriptural promises. In response to the Jewish demand for preferential treatment Paul wants to affirm God's freedom in the exercise of his mercy and judgment. There are numerous statements in Romans 9-11 which clearly demonstrate that Paul was not a theological determinist. Cf. Glen Shellrude, 'The Freedom of God in Mercy and Judgment: A Libertarian Reading of Romans 9:6-29', *Evangelical Quarterly* 81.4 (2009), 306-318.

³⁰ Augustine would have been familiar with determinism from both Manichaeism and Stoicism. However it appears that his determinism is rooted in the Platonic and neo-Platonic concept that an absolutely perfect being (God) must be 'impassible or immutable', i.e. could not experience any inward changes. Cf. John Sanders, *The God Who Risks* (2nd ed; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 149-153.

A Calvinist reading of the various kinds of New Testament material discussed in this paper is in the end an exercise in eisegesis on a grand scale which in turn generates an enormous amount of textual destruction. One must impose a deterministic theological framework on texts through the use of consistently counterintuitive and ahistorical interpretive strategies.³¹

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

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

God reveals that he is responsive to prayer while in his secret will ordains that only those petitions which he ensures correlate with the script he wrote before creating the world will 'appear' to have been 'answered'.

God has revealed that believers should align themselves with truth while simultaneously ordaining that believers embrace a wide range of erroneous thinking.

God has revealed that believers are 'to be perfect as he is perfect' while simultaneously ordaining the precise expression and degree of sin which will characterize each believer.

³¹ When reading online responses to books debating the Calvinist-Arminian issue (e.g. on Amazon.com), I often notice lay Calvinists pointing out that Arminians argue from a more philosophical perspective while Calvinists argue from Scripture and have the upper hand with respect to Scriptural proof texts. They conclude from this that Calvinism is the more 'Scriptural theology'. In reality Calvinism is deeply and profoundly contradicted by the Scripture in that theological determinism requires the exegetical abuse of 'countless' Biblical texts. This is not immediately apparent to most people because they don't reflect on the implications of consistent theological determinism for reading each Scriptural statement.

God has revealed that believers should not divorce their spouses but in his secret will has ordained that believers divorce their spouses with about the same frequency as is true in secular society.

God has revealed that he cares about children while simultaneously ordaining that vast numbers of children are abused, neglected, and sexually exploited.

God has revealed that believers are to honor and delight him while ordaining that much of the time believers deeply grieve him and bring shame on the Gospel.

God has revealed that he is uncompromisingly opposed to sin and evil while in his ordaining will has scripted a staggering level of sin and evil in human history.

God's 'secret will' is fully knowable with respect to the present and past since all that happens corresponds precisely to what he has ordained. What cannot be known are the disparities between God's 'revealed will' and 'secret will' as it relates to future events.

One implication of this construct is that Christians are often simultaneously working on the side of God's revealed will but against God's secret will. Thus, for example, Christians who give themselves to working with the suffering children of the world can be assured that their goals are in complete alignment with God's revealed will. However it is possible that they are working against God's secret/ordaining will. If this is the case then their work will bear little or no results. This is true for every aspect of Christian ministry.

The result is a view of God which represents him as having two distinct wills which are deeply conflicted and contradictory.

Fifth, on Calvinist assumptions Scriptural statements cannot mean what they appear to mean but must be decoded within the framework of theological determinism (as illustrated in the previous point and throughout this paper).

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

Calvinists justify God's ordination of the monumental scale of evil and sin in human experience by arguing that God has 'morally justified reasons' for acting in this way in that some greater good, fully known only to God, is served by all the carnage. The difficulty with challenging this argument is the claim that 'the reasons are known only to God'. However given the magnitude of sin and evil in human experience, if the Calvinist argument were true, then it should be obvious that in many cases that these evils served some demonstrable good. Furthermore since on Calvinist assumptions God can script history as he chooses, he could have accomplished the same good results with much less evil and ambiguity. In any case it is easier to evaluate the argument with respect to the eternal destiny of men and women. What are the 'morally justified

reasons' for God's decision that the vast majority of people will be unable to respond to God because he has ordained that their destiny will be one of eternal torment? How can this be reconciled with God's self-revelation as one characterized by absolute love, mercy and holiness? This is especially problematic for those Calvinists who take the position that God does indeed desire the salvation of every person but chooses to ordain that the majority of humanity will experience the horror of eternal separation. Given the Calvinist denial of free will, there would be nothing to prevent God from ordaining the salvation of all and then so working in each person so that they ultimately respond to him.

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

It is evident that the scale of evil and carnage in the world is truly monumental. The question can be asked as to which worldview best accounts for this phenomena: 1. atheism; 2. a deterministic theism; 3. a theistic perspective which affirms the reality of libertarian freedom. I personally believe an atheistic view of reality is more plausible than theological determinism. On atheistic assumptions the explanation might be that humans are the product of natural evolutionary forces and what we chose to describe as evils are all part of the natural evolutionary process. On the assumptions of theological determinism, God could just as easily have constructed a script for human history in which there was no evil or far less evil than is actually the case. However on Calvinist assumptions, God intentionally chose to write a script with all the evil and carnage that we observe. It is impossible to reconcile this with God's self-revelation as one characterized by love, mercy, holiness and an uncompromising opposition to sin and evil. A theistic world view constructed on the assumption that God has created men and women with genuine libertarian freedom provides a much more plausible account of reality in that the explanation for a great deal of what is wrong with the world can be traced to the sinful abuse of the gift of libertarian freedom.³²

Calvinists like to claim that their theology serves to highlight the holiness and glory of God. In reality Calvinism denigrates God's holiness and glory with its claim that God has choreographed every expression of sin and evil in human experience.³³

³² I realize that the affirmation of libertarian freedom does not explain everything and leaves plenty of room for 'mystery'.

³³ In his sermon *Free Grace*, John Wesley said that Satan might as well take a permanent leave of absence since God does Satan's work far more effectively: 'You, with all your principalities

Seventh, theological determinism in effect denies the Scriptural affirmation that God desires to be in relationship with the women and men who he created. If one day we are able to actualize the science fiction notion of creating artificial intelligence that replicates human behaviors, it is difficult to imagine that people would find joy in relationships with those who are following their programming 100% of the time. It is also impossible to imagine that the God who created men and women for relationship would find joy in relationship with those who were simply following their divine programming at every point. Why would God find delight in human responses to his grace which were completely ordained by him and never freely chosen? Are we to believe that God takes delight in expressions of love, worship and praise which he himself has scripted?

What would we think of a novelist or script writer who restricted their relationships to mental ones with the characters they had created in literary works and movies? A good movie is one that creates tension and drama by conveying the impression that people are making real decisions and therefore the outcome is in doubt. But in fact it is all an illusion as every action and word has been scripted in advance. Calvinism affirms that this is also true of real life and that, by implication, God delights in relationships with the characters who are playing out their divinely scripted roles.

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

and powers, can only so assault that we may resist you; but He can irresistibly destroy both body and soul in hell! You can only entice; but his unchangeable decrees, to leave thousands of souls in death, compels them to continue in sin, till they drop into everlasting burnings. You tempt; He forces us to be damned; for we cannot resist his will. You fool, why do you go about any longer, seeking whom you may devour? Have you not heard that God is the devouring lion, the destroyer of souls, the murderer of men?’ <http://new.gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/128/> (I have modernized the language.) In reality the God of Calvinism requires Satan to stay on the job in order ‘to keep his hands clean’. God choreographs evil and sin in human experience through ‘second causes’ and Satan is a major source of ‘second causes’. Roger Olsen, *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God*, 163, points out that Arminius himself argued that on Calvinist assumptions the only real sinner in the universe is God. It is striking how in the present many Christians go ballistic over the ‘gnat’ of open theism but happily embrace the ‘camel’ of Calvinism.

"The Minister's Daughter"
John Greenleaf Whittier

Then up spoke the little maiden,
Treading on snow and pink:
"O father! These pretty blossoms
Are very wicked, I think.

"Had there been no Garden of Eden
There never had been a fall;
And if never a tree had blossomed
God would have loved us all."

"Hush, child!" the father answered,
"By his decree man fell;
His ways are in clouds and darkness,
But he doeth all things well.

"And whether by his ordaining
To us cometh good or ill,
Joy or pain, or light or shadow,
We must fear and love him still.

"O, I fear him!" said the daughter,
"And I try to love him too;
But I wish he was good and gentle
Kind and loving as you."