

*Denny Kuhn*

# Can God Handle Sin Sinlessly? Determinism and the Relationship between God and Evil

## INTRODUCTION

*[Thou art] of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity.  
Habakkuk 1:13*

I received my inspiration for writing this paper while listening to a systematic theology lecture given by Douglas Kelly of Reformed Theological Seminary. It was during this lecture that I heard a statement that shocked me and struck me as truly alarming. Kelly was quoting theologian William Still who claimed, "God handles sin sinlessly."<sup>1</sup> I had never heard or entertained such an idea before, and the concept immediately seemed problematic.

The relationship between God and evil has always been an elusive and mysterious one. In fact, many people are convinced that the most formidable arguments against the Christian faith are arguments from the problem of evil. Throughout the history of philosophy and Christian thought various attempts have been made at answering this challenge to the faith. After having read some of the more prominent and well respected Reformed theologians, like Herman Bavinck and Louis Berkhof, I must say that I am disturbed by their approach to this difficult subject.<sup>2</sup> If I have understood their teachings correctly, as well as those of Kelly, and even that of John Calvin, their argument leads logically to a relationship between God and evil that is both inconsistent and highly problematic. It is my purpose in this paper to show that, even though they would deny the claim, the logical conclusion which must be drawn

1. Quoted in lecture 10 of Douglas Kelly's Systematic Theology I class for Reformed Theological Seminary.

2. Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) taught as Professor of Theology at Kampen from 1883 to 1902, after which he succeeded Abraham Kuyper as the chair of Systematic Theology in the Free University of Amsterdam. He authored many books but is most famous for his great work, the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek (The Doctrine of God)*. Louis Berkhof (1873-1957) taught for thirty-eight years as professor at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Berkhof produced many books as well, his magnum opus being his *Systematic Theology*. (Bibliographical information will appear below when their works are cited.)

from their teachings is that God is the author of sin, the cause of evil. I will also show that this conclusion has devastating implications for their system as a whole. In fact, God cannot handle sin sinlessly.

#### REFORMED CLAIMS OF GOD'S DETERMINISM

In the following pages, I will provide statements by the above mentioned Reformed theologians and the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (WCF) that describe God's determination as it relates to his creation. This will enable the reader to have a more rounded understanding of Reformed theology—specifically regarding how Calvinism paints the picture of God's ordering of his creation.

The WCF states,

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.<sup>3</sup>

In this Reformed confession we find the claim that “whatsoever comes to pass” only comes about because of the determining power of God's sovereign will. Bavinck agrees with the WCF, for he defines God's eternal decree as, “his eternal purpose whereby he has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass.”<sup>4</sup> He elaborates on this definition by saying, “Apart from his knowledge and will nothing can ever come to pass.”<sup>5</sup> Kelly, quoting Wolebius, defines the decree of God as “an internal act of the divine will by which he determines from eternity freely with absolute certainty those matters which shall happen in time.”<sup>6</sup> Statements such as these elucidate the strong emphasis within Reformed theology on the determining nature of God's will. This will according to these definitions is first “eternal,” meaning that it transcends time; thus there is no chronological ordering in his decrees but only a logical ordering. Second, it reflects God's “purpose” and so establishes what, in fact, God foreordains to happen, not based on anything other than what he so chooses. Third, it

3. *Westminster Confession of Faith*, “Of God's Eternal Decree” (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian, 2001), 3:1, 28.

4. Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, trans. William Hendriksen (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1997), 369.

5. *Ibid.*, 369.

6. Douglas Kelly, “Systematic Theology I,” course notebook (Charlotte: Reformed Theological Seminary, 2003), 75.

is done “freely and with absolute certainty”: there is no outside force compelling God to act in a certain fashion, and what he decides to fore-ordain must happen without the possibility that it will not come to pass.

Bavinck, describing God’s sovereignty, says God’s “will is decisive everywhere and always” and “is the final ground of all things and of their being what they are. Everything is derived from it.”<sup>7</sup> One must understand that this decisiveness and certainty of what comes to pass as a result of God’s will also includes human actions, not just the movement of other created bodies within space and time. Nothing happens outside of God’s ordaining power.

This is the means by which God foreknows what will come about in the future: he foreknows because he determined everything to be as it will be. No course of events will be produced that surprises God because he is the one who has ordered their arrangement. Along with Bavinck, the other Reformed theologians describe God’s foreknowledge as a result of his determining all future events, including human actions. Thus, God does not foreknow these events as free human actions merely because he foresees them; rather, he ordains all events, including human actions, to their fruition.

One cannot help but wonder how this affects the human will in decision making. Accordingly, Bavinck refers to Augustine on this matter, showing that church father’s attempt at reconciling God’s foreknowledge and the freedom of the human will:

He [Augustine] is aware of the fact that whenever God foreknows an act, its fruition is certain; otherwise the entire structure of divine foreknowledge would collapse like a house of cards. “If foreknowledge does not foreknow things that will certainly happen; it is nothing at all.” Hence, he states that man’s will together with its entire nature and all its decisions is included in, established, and maintained by God’s foreknowledge, and is not destroyed by it.<sup>8</sup>

Berkhof discusses how the freedom of God’s deterministic will relates to his creatures’ actions:

God’s creatures . . . are the objects of His *voluntas libera*. God determines *voluntarily* what and whom He will create, and the times, places, and circumstances, of their lives. He marks out the path of all His rational creatures, determines their destiny,

7. Bavinck, 223.

8. Bavinck, 190.

and uses them for His purposes. And though He endows them with freedom, yet His will controls their actions.<sup>9</sup>

Berkhof specifically affirms that God's will "controls their actions." Thus he agrees that man's actions are wholly determined, by the will of God, to be what they will be. Calvin also understands this as the proper explanation for God's foreknowledge. He writes, "Since he [God] foresees future events only by reason of the fact that he decreed that they take place . . . it is clear that all things take place rather by his determination and bidding."<sup>10</sup> Hence, if "all things take place" as the result of God's "determination and bidding," then logically there can be nothing that happens outside of this determination or God's plan for the universe.

Enquiring minds may wonder, "What is God's rationale behind why he determines things to be as they are?" By this question, I do not mean to sound blasphemous, as though I were challenging God for a reason. On the contrary, I am positing this question to the Reformed theologian. Bavinck offers his answer: "'God's good pleasure' is the final ground of all things. Beyond this we cannot go. The final answer to the question why a thing is and why it is as it is must ever remain: 'God willed it,' according to his absolute sovereignty."<sup>11</sup> Hence, the answer to the question is that there is no answer known. The reason God determines things to be as they are or will be is left as a mystery, for one cannot go any further in investigating the will of God. For the Calvinist, to ask the above question would be akin to asking God why he exists. God does not owe man an answer for what he, in his sovereignty, wills. This should be sufficient to shut the door in the face of any challenges to his determined arrangement. "Who art thou, O man?" is the common rejoinder.<sup>12</sup>

God's determining influence on his handiwork could not be more evident than what has been discussed in the preceding. The terminology used by the Reformed theologians depicts the absoluteness of God's control over everything, without exception. It is not unnatural to wonder, then, how this certainty of all events and actions as a result of God's determination relates to sin and evil. As the above quotations seem to

9. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 78.

10. John Calvin, ed. John T. McNeill, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 2:955.

11. Bavinck, 371.

12. Stephen M. Ashby refers to this appeal to Romans 9:20 by Calvinists, whenever their system is challenged, as their "default mode." The problem with the Calvinist using this "default mode" as a comeback is that the challenge is not made to God, as is the case in the passage in Romans 9, but it is posed to the Reformed system. No system of theology should be considered exempt from such a challenge, lest it become an idol.

imply, did God determine these two antitheses of his character and will just as he did everything else? Does “whatsoever comes to pass” really mean everything, including sin and evil? That would seem to be the natural reading of these Reformed writers. We must therefore examine Reformed statements concerning God’s relationship to sin and evil.

#### REFORMED CLAIMS THAT GOD IS NOT THE AUTHOR OF SIN

Again, quoting from the *WCF*,

The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God so far manifest themselves in His providence, that it extendeth itself even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men; and that not by a bare permission, but such as hath joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to His own holy ends; yet so, as the sinfulness thereof proceedeth only from the creature, and not from God, who, being most holy and righteous, neither is, nor can be, the author or approver of sin.<sup>13</sup>

Clearly the *WCF* denies that God is the author of sin. It claims that God’s providence extends to even “the first fall”; nevertheless, the confession attributes the origin of sin to God’s creatures (angels and humans). Bavinck also wants to avoid the notion that God is the author of sin, as does each of the Reformed theologians presented in this discussion. They often indicate that sin can only result from a corrupt will but that God’s will is perfect and without vice. The real will in God is the “will of ‘God’s good pleasure,’ identical with God’s being, immutable and efficacious.”<sup>14</sup> Sin and evil are the antitheses of God; they are completely contrary to his divine being. Thus, God could not have anything to do with being the cause of them.

It should be said emphatically that *God cannot sin*. He can only do that which is logically possible, and sinning would be logically impossible for God, though logically possible for humans. Bavinck addresses this while speaking of the relationship between God’s will and his omnipotence in which he declares, “Scripture . . . clearly teaches that there are certain things which God cannot do. . . . He cannot deny himself. . . . If God could go astray, if he could sin, etc., this, indeed, would be an

13. *WCF*, “Of Providence,” 5:4, 35-36.

14. Bavinck, 239.

indication of impotence."<sup>15</sup> Berkhof expresses similar thoughts: "In general it may be said that God cannot will anything that is contrary to His nature, to His wisdom or love, to His righteousness or holiness."<sup>16</sup> The fact that God cannot sin is not to be seen as a weakness on his part. Rather, the ability to sin is a sign of weakness on the part of man.

We queried above the *WCF* claim that God decrees "whatsoever comes to pass." Both the *WCF* and the Reformed theologians wish to exclude sin from the list of things God caused or authored, though they will admit that he authored everything else. Berkhof further distinguishes between the two, both of which are included in God's decree:

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. . . . God assumes no responsibility for these sinful acts whatsoever.<sup>17</sup>

Hence, God has nothing to do causally with the sinful actions of man. He did cause man. But, it is claimed, man caused sin. God allowed or permitted man to cause sin for a resulting greater good, God's glory. He did not will sin to happen simply as sin, but for the accomplishment of something greater he willed it. Bavinck offers more light:

Sin and punishment, considered in and by themselves, can never have been willed by God. They are in conflict with his nature. He is far removed from wickedness, and he doth not afflict willingly: he does not do it "from the heart." Hence, sin and punishment were willed by God in this sense only as means unto a different, better, and greater good.<sup>18</sup>

Upon reading the varied claims presented in the last two sections, I am amazed at the Calvinists' willingness to accept their obvious inconsistencies. To be fair, these Reformed theologians are not completely

15. Bavinck, 244.

16. Berkhof, 78.

17. *Ibid.*, 103.

18. Bavinck, 400-401.

happy with them either. Indeed, they recognize the problem of God's relationship to evil and sin. However, the resolution is typically sought in an appeal to mystery. One must swallow hard at the *prima facie* contradiction found in the affirmation that God ordains, determines, decrees, establishes, maintains, and controls "whatsoever comes to pass"—"everything" and "all things" including human actions—by his sovereign will, yet somehow man is responsible for sin. This seems to be nothing more than double-talk. Something is not settling right here, and this apparent contradiction requires further examination.

#### INCONSISTENCY AND CONTRADICTION IN THE REFORMED CLAIMS

Once again, we turn to the *WCF*, which concerning the free will of man stipulates, "God hath endued the will of man with that natural liberty, that it is neither forced, nor by any absolute necessity of nature determined to good or evil."<sup>19</sup> But how does this harmonize with what we saw in the statements above concerning God's determination, human actions, sin and evil? Are they contradictory?

Bavinck expresses the problem:

A special difficulty, however, confronts us in the study of the doctrine of God's will; namely, the fact of evil, both "evil as guilt and evil as punishment." It may be ever so true that God controls evil; nevertheless, evil cannot be the object of God's will in the same sense and manner as is its opposite. Hence, with a view to these two entirely different and opposite objects, viz., good and evil, we must make a distinction in regard to the will of God.<sup>20</sup>

Berkhof appeals to antinomy with reference to the relationship of God's will to sin. He claims, "Problems arise here which have never yet been solved and which are probably incapable of solution by man."<sup>21</sup> When confronting the objection that the divine decree makes God the author of sin, he amazingly grants, "This, if true, would naturally be an insuperable objection, for God cannot be the author of sin."<sup>22</sup> He continues by saying that the charge is not true, but that "the decree merely makes God the author of free moral beings, who are themselves the authors of sin."<sup>23</sup>

19. *WCF*, "Of Free Will," 9:1, 51.

20. Bavinck, 236.

21. Berkhof, 78.

22. *Ibid.*, 107.

23. *Ibid.*, 108.

However, at the same time that Bavinck wants to make a distinction between good and evil as objects of God's will, he unequivocally maintains that, in fact, "God controls evil." He says this again in the following statement, "God does not will sin, he is far from iniquity, he forbids it and punishes it severely; but sin nevertheless exists and is controlled by him."<sup>24</sup> Bavinck cannot escape the idea that God's hands are directly on the reins of the chariot of evil, though he wants to deny God's causal relation to it. Similarly Kelly says, "God is specifically in control of evil,"<sup>25</sup> adding "specifically" to his description of the relationship.

In like manner, Berkhof states, "It should be borne in mind that God's will to permit sin carries certainty with it."<sup>26</sup> Berkhof emphasizes both the certainty of sin and God's control of it:

It is customary to speak of the decree of God respecting moral evil as permissive. By His decree God rendered the sinful actions of man infallibly certain. . . . 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.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, it is clear from Berkhof that the sinful acts of man are rendered "infallibly certain" and "absolutely certain." Although Berkhof says that this certainty does not interfere with man's "self-determination," he admits that it regulates and controls what is produced by it. The question persists, then: How is it that God has this control of evil, as stated by these theologians, without having some kind of causal relation to it as he does for everything else he controls?

In describing Calvin's position on predestination, Bavinck states, "Let not the reprobate view God's decree as the cause of his perdition, but let him rather look upon his own corrupt nature with respect to which he himself is guilty."<sup>28</sup> Here again, the move is made from God to man in finding a source for the results of sin in man's corrupt nature. But that cannot be the ultimate source. Bavinck notes: "The fall in Adam is the *nearest* cause of reprobation,"<sup>29</sup> not its primary cause. This is a subtle

24. Bavinck, 236.

25. Kelly, 127.

26. Berkhof, 79.

27. *Ibid.*, 105.

28. Bavinck, 362.

29. *Ibid.*, 362. Italics added.



shift in accountability: the fall cannot be the primary cause for Bavinck, but only the “nearest” cause, because he believes the fall is the result of the nature of man, which in turn is only a proximate cause. Since human nature is caused or created by God, it is God who then becomes the primary cause.

This conclusion is inevitable considering that man was created in an original state of righteousness. Prior to the fall, man’s nature did not include an inclination or bent towards sinning. Consequently, for Adam’s original nature, completely innocent and without blemish, to cause him to sin would require something from outside his nature to compel him. For Bavinck, then, the fall is only the “nearest” cause for reprobation; his determinism requires that a deeper cause than the fall must be found. He locates this in the will of God. Thus, in a roundabout way, Bavinck implicitly admits God’s causal relation to sin, even though he tries to deny this relation by blaming man’s nature. Nevertheless, this nature cannot be finally responsible for the fall since it is only a proximate cause and man was created in an original state of righteousness.

This also appears to be Calvin’s sentiments. For Calvin, according to Bavinck’s interpretation of his writing,

Sin may be the proximate cause of perdition, it is, nevertheless, not the deepest cause. . . . Foreknowledge and permission do not solve the problem, because God, foreseeing the fall, could have prevented it; accordingly, he voluntarily permitted the fall because it seemed good to him. Accordingly, the fall of Adam, sin in general, and all evil, were not only foreseen by God but in a certain sense were willed and determined by him. . . . The final and deepest cause of reprobation as well as of election is the will of God. . . . Accordingly, there must have been a reason, unknown to us, why God willed the fall: there is “a deeper divine decree” logically preceding the fall.<sup>30</sup>

According to Bavinck, Calvin taught that the fall was not only foreseen by God but was “in a certain sense . . . willed and determined by him.” The primary or “deepest” cause for Calvin is God himself, not man’s nature.

Nor can it be otherwise for the Calvinist. Man’s nature was originally perfect and cannot be blameworthy. Likewise, man’s corrupt nature cannot be responsible for sin because sin must be present in order that the nature might become corrupt. Thus man was only a sufficient cause,

30. Bavinck, 363.

but God's decree was the efficient cause. God created man and decreed that he would fall, not based on man's free actions (refer to the discussion above concerning the Reformed view of God's foreknowledge) but based on God's hidden will. Calvin offers support for this claim. Speaking of God's decree of the fall, he reveals his loathing of the idea at first but then immediately offers an explanation: "The decree is dreadful indeed, I confess. Yet no one can deny that God foreknew what end man was to have before he created him, and consequently foreknew because he so ordained by his decree."<sup>31</sup> Then, seeking a further defense of this decree, Calvin states something startling when he suggests,

And it ought not to seem absurd for me to say that God not only foresaw the fall of the first man, and in him the ruin of his descendants, but also *meted it out in accordance with his own decision*. For as it pertains to his wisdom to foreknow everything that is to happen, so it pertains to his might to rule and *control everything by his hand*.<sup>32</sup>

Calvin could not be clearer as he locates the origin of man's sinful nature in God. He clearly states that the fall of Adam was not merely permitted or allowed as a part of God's plan but that God "meted it out [i.e., the fall] in accordance with his own decision." Moreover, God's "hand" was in "control" of the whole act, as it is of "everything." He further states that "the first man fell because the Lord had judged it to be expedient; why he so judged is hidden from us."<sup>33</sup> Once again, the decision of the fall is said to rest in the judgment and determination of God; yet, in order to doctor the apparent inconsistency, the ever-convenient appeal is made to mystery.

Just then, however, when it would seem Calvin had established God as the decisive factor in the fall, grounded in the mysterious will of God, in the very same section of his writing he affirms,

Man falls according as God's providence ordains, but he falls by his own fault. Whence, then, comes that wickedness to man, that he should fall away from his God? . . . By his own evil intention, then, man corrupted the pure nature he had received from the Lord. . . . Accordingly, we should contemplate the evident cause of condemnation in the corrupt nature of humanity

31. Calvin, 2:955.

32. *Ibid.*, 2:955-56. Italics added.

33. *Ibid.*, 2:957.

. . . rather than seek a hidden and utterly incomprehensible cause in God's predestination.<sup>34</sup>

This is nothing more than a repetition of the contradictory statements that have been cited by prominent Reformed theologians throughout this study. Calvin has located the determining factor of the fall in God's judgment and has appealed to what is "hidden" from us as an explanation. But only sentences later, he argues that though the fall was ordained by God's providence, it is man's fault alone; and at the same time he warns against an appeal to what is "hidden" and "incomprehensible" as an explanation for this event.

In fact, these are two contradictory ideas about God and his relation to his creation. It is inescapable under this kind of deterministic system to identify God as the cause of "whatsoever comes to pass" and yet somehow exclude him as the author of sin. Bavinck is guilty of this same contradiction when he writes concerning the difference between supra- and infralapsarianism:

On the one hand, supralapsarians as well as infralapsarians teach that God is not the Author of sin, but that the cause of sin lies in the will of man. Though, as the Omnipotent One, God predestined the fall, and though, as Supreme Ruler, he executes his plan even by means of sin; nevertheless, he remains holy and righteous; of his own accord man falls and sins: the guilt is his alone: "Man falls according to the appointment of divine providence, but he falls by his own fault. . . . Man's fall, sin, and the eternal punishment of many was not the object of 'bare knowledge' but of God's decree and foreordination. Hence, the difference does not concern the content of God's counsel. Both infra- and supralapsarianism deny the freedom of the will, reject the idea that faith is the cause of election and that sin is the cause of reprobation."<sup>35</sup>

Here, Bavinck admits that God decreed and foreordained the fall and sin. Both positions (supra- and infralapsarianism) on the order of God's decrees reject sin as the cause of reprobation. Logically it follows that if sin is not the cause of reprobation, but rather God's decree, then God would have to cause the sinful nature in man. For the only way one could manifest this reprobate character would be by sinning. In other words, reprobation comes prior to sin, and not the other way around. Therefore,

34. Ibid.

35. Bavinck, 385.

God creates, originates, and authors beings that sin, not by their own self-determined desires, but by what God orders them to do by their nature, which he creates. By this understanding, God causes sinful human actions by creating humans in the state of reprobation. Though this sounds astonishing, Bavinck offers further support for his position:

Faith and good works, to be sure, are not the cause of election, but neither is sin the cause of reprobation; God's sovereign good pleasure is the cause of both; hence, in a certain sense, the decree of reprobation always precedes the decree to permit sin.<sup>36</sup>

The cause of reprobation is not found in sin, but in "God's sovereign good pleasure" according to Bavinck. However, he is not consistent in putting the blame on God for this system. He admits that it is a curious arrangement and that we do not know God's reasons for determining it as such. He takes for granted that God's reasons were good, and thus does not think to challenge the deterministic system itself. Instead, as is usually the case when it comes to this point, an appeal is made to mystery because of the recognizable inconsistency. He says, "We are not able to say why God willed to make use of this means and not of another."<sup>37</sup>

The problem in this causal chain is that God becomes the primary cause. If *a* implies *b*, and *b* implies *c*, then it logically follows that *a* implies *c*. This is an example of the basic principle of logic known as transitive relation.<sup>38</sup> Here *a* represents God, *b* represents reprobation, and *c* symbolizes sin. The result, which flows from this relation, yields an unavoidable conclusion. At the same time, it meshes with the statements above affirming the Reformed system of determinism. Bavinck unknowingly confirms the validity of this relation, and the connection could not be any clearer. He states, "Reformed theologians all agree that the entrance of sin and punishment was willed and determined by God."<sup>39</sup> Therefore, the source, author, originator, artificer, creator, and primary cause of sin is God, based on this Reformed deterministic system.

Finally, it should be noted that there are examples of recent Reformed theologians using language that identifies God as the cause of sin and evil. Respected Reformed theologian John Frame, during a lecture given at a seminar for Reformed Theological Seminary, asked, "Is God's will

36. *Ibid.*, 386.

37. Bavinck, 387.

38. Ted Honderich, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University, 1995), 879.

39. Bavinck, 388.

the ultimate explanation for everything?" Frame then gave his own reply: "*He foreordains sinful acts.*"<sup>40</sup>

C. S. LEWIS'S MODEL FOR ADDRESSING THE PROBLEMS  
OF A DETERMINISTIC SYSTEM

C. S. Lewis, in his book *Miracles*, proposes a defeating challenge to the worldview known as Naturalism. Naturalism holds to the claim that only an eternal, totally uniform, self-explanatory, and *completely deterministic* natural order exists. What is relevant about Lewis's argument is his attack on the determinism of such a worldview. Because the system of Naturalism is characterized by a cause and effect arrangement in every respect regarding the relations between what exists within the system, Lewis locates a problem that is detrimental to its viability as a worldview:

Inside the total system every particular event (such as your sitting reading this book) happens because some other event has happened; in the long run, because the Total Event is happening. Each particular thing (such as this page) is what it is because other things are what they are; and so, eventually, because the whole system is what it is. All the things and events are so completely interlocked that no one of them can claim the slightest independence from the "the whole show." None of them exists "on its own" or "goes on of its own accord." . . . Thus no thoroughgoing Naturalist believes in free will; for free will would mean that human beings have the power of independent action, the power of doing something more or other than what was involved by the total series of events.<sup>41</sup>

Lewis thus explains the completely interlocking and interdependency of everything within the "Total Event" and how everything within the system only acts or is caused by something else within the system. Accordingly, free will is not a possibility because this would require something to act of "its own accord," as Lewis says. In other words, it would have to maintain a state of being or action that is independent of the system as a whole. But this just simply is not possible for Naturalism.

40. Quoted in the unpublished paper by Stephen M. Ashby titled "The Pastor's Proving Ground," presented on July 22, 2003, at the Theological Trends Seminar for the National Association of Free Will Baptists Convention in Tampa, Florida. Frame's lecture was presented on January 7, 2002, at a seminar for Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte, North Carolina.

41. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 8.

Lewis goes on to show how this determinism inevitably destroys Naturalism. He explains,

If naturalism is true, every finite thing or event must be (in principle) explicable in terms of the Total System. . . . If Naturalism is to be accepted we have a right to demand that every single thing should be such that we see, in general, how it could be explained in terms of the Total System. If any one thing exists which is of such a kind that we see in advance the impossibility of ever giving it that kind of explanation, then Naturalism would be in ruins. If necessities of thought force us to allow to any one thing any degree of independence from the Total System—if any one thing makes good a claim to be on its own, to be something more than an expression of the character of Nature as a whole—then we have abandoned Naturalism.<sup>42</sup>

Lewis then proceeds to delineate certain things that we accept as basic beliefs that cannot be explained by Naturalism's determinism: for example, the laws of logical inference. If one thing exists outside or transcends the system, Naturalism as a worldview must be rejected. This is the plight of a system that is grounded in determinism.

It is interesting to note Bavinck's description of God's decree as it relates to the universe. His description sounds remarkably similar to the determinism of Lewis's "interlocking" and "Total System" of Naturalism. According to Bavinck,

God's decree should not be exclusively described . . . as a straight line to indicate a relation merely of before and after, cause and effect, means and goal; but it should also be viewed as a system the several elements of which are coordinately related to one another. . . . As in an organism all the members are dependent upon one another and in a reciprocal manner determine one another, so also the universe is God's work of art, the several parts of which are organically related.<sup>43</sup>

Though Bavinck shies away from the straightforward cause/effect description of his system, he clearly thinks of it in terms of an interdependent, reciprocally determining composition of all that is within the system. One only needs to recall his earlier affirmations of this determinism. He describes God's determining power over all the elements of this system as grounded in God's decree:

42. Lewis, *Miracles*, 17-18.

43. Bavinck, 394.

God's decree is all-comprehensive and therefore applies first of all to the universe as a whole. Everything exists and takes place in accordance with God's decree: this is true with respect to the inorganic as well as the organic realm. All things rest upon God's ordinances.<sup>44</sup>

Bavinck makes this even clearer when speaking of God's providence. Concerning what kinds of things are included in the determined order of God's decree, he says, "Of great significance is the fact that all things are included in this decree: not only the determination of the eternal destiny of rational creatures (predestination), but the arrangement and ordination of all things *without any exception*."<sup>45</sup> Again, he offers an explanation of the created order that parallels the "Total System" and even affirms that secondary causes should not be mistaken for the real, primary cause of all events:

The harmony between the phenomena and happenings in the world of reality is a perfect reflex of the harmony in the sphere of God's ideas and decrees. Scripture often limits itself to a discussion of these "secondary causes" and Reformed theologians have accepted them in their full significance. But these secondary causes do not constitute the final and deepest cause. . . . An appeal to the nature or character of these things is not a satisfactory answer, for also that nature has been determined by God.<sup>46</sup>

Although Bavinck provides us with a portrayal of the deterministic harmony that exists among God's physical, natural creatures, this determinism should not be limited to the physical sphere. The moral sphere should not be considered as somehow distinct and unaffected by this determinism. Berkhof makes this clear: "The decree includes whatsoever comes to pass in the world, whether it be in the physical or in the moral realm, whether it be good or evil."<sup>47</sup> Thus, again, we have an implicit admission that God determines the sinful and evil actions of man. Finally, Berkhof offers a denial of self-determined human actions by relegating them to secondary causes; this means that they are only instrumental in their action, logically making God the initiator. At the same time, Berkhof affirms the specificity of these human acts, meaning that

44. Bavinck, 374.

45. *Ibid.*, 374. Italics added.

46. *Ibid.*, 402-3.

47. Berkhof, 105.

whether they are good or evil they are determined with certainty. He 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. . . . God causes everything in nature to work and to move in the direction of a pre-determined end. 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.<sup>48</sup>

As Lewis has dealt a deathblow to Naturalism by showing that there are certain things that exist outside of the "Total System," I would suggest that this line of argumentation becomes the Achilles' heel for the Reformed system of determinism as well. By showing that there is something that exists which remains unaccounted for by their system, that is, man's actual sins and the existence of evil, the system in its entirety collapses. It is a system designed to explain everything within itself, and yet there exists something that cannot be resolved by an appeal to anything else within the system.

Admittedly, for Lewis the key difference between Naturalism and Supernaturalism is that God does not exist in the former, while he does exist in the latter, outside of the natural order. Thus, technically speaking, God is not a part of the natural system. But this distinction is irrelevant for the present discussion. For Lewis, something outside of the natural order was evidence for the existence of the supernatural. However, the distinction between natural and supernatural has no bearing on the problem with determinism being examined here. It is also unimportant that God's creatures do not reciprocally determine him in the Reformed system, whereas in Naturalism everything determines everything in some form or another. The problem with determinism still stands whether God is viewed as part of the system or outside of it. Moreover, his determining action within the system makes him a part of the system, regardless of the natural/supernatural distinction and the lack of reciprocal determination. Thus, the Reformed view of determinism should be treated as a total system similar to Naturalism. It is evident that this is the methodology used by many Reformed theologians, as witnessed by the above descriptions of the created order as such.

48. *Ibid.*, 173.



The question at hand is, "Can the Reformed deterministic model of the created order explain all that exists within that order?" Based on determinism, the answer is, *absolutely not*. The only way the answer could be "yes" is if God were made to be the author of evil and thus determined all of the evil actions of man. But this is impossible, for God cannot be the cause of evil and yet be God. I have already discussed above the contradiction involved in associating God with evil. Proposing God as the author of sin would be a violation of the law of noncontradiction. God can no more be or cause evil than two plus two can equal five. Causing sin would be entirely antithetical to what is essential to his character as *the Good*. Reformed theologian Jonathan Edwards recognizes this in defending his deterministic doctrine against the accusation that it makes God the author of sin. He states,

If by the Author of Sin, be meant the Sinner, the Agent, or Actor of Sin, or the Doer of a wicked thing; so it would be a reproach and blasphemy, to suppose God to be the Author of Sin. In this sense, I utterly deny God to be the Author of Sin; rejecting such an imputation on the Most High, as what is infinitely to be abhorred.<sup>49</sup>

Edwards continues his effort to show that the doctrine he had "laid down" does not result in making God the "Author of Sin." However, the logical implications of his determinism are not different from those of Bavinck, Berkhof, and Calvin. The Reformed view, as presented by the theologians analyzed above, is left wanting as an adequate picture of reality. It either makes God the author of sin and evil, which would mean the affirming of a logical contradiction, or it must give up its determinism and allow for *genuine* (as opposed to the inconsistent presentation above) self-determination of God's creatures as a more viable option. A libertarian conception of freedom for God's creatures (a view accepted by Lewis) is the only valid explanation for the existence of sin and evil in God's created order.

It must be understood that sin, or evil, is not a metaphysical reality. As Augustine explains, evil has no being; rather, it is the "privation of the

49. Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards with a Memoir by Sereno E. Dwight*, revised and corrected by Edward Hickman, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1990), 1:76.

good."<sup>50</sup> The existence of sin and evil is not a question of being or substance; instead, it is a problem of volition, that is, a willful departure from doing what is good.<sup>51</sup> Sin and evil could not exist without the existence of a volitional being. Thus, in order for sin and evil to exist within the Reformed deterministic system, God becomes the only volitional being who is able to will them.

Lewis maintains that Naturalism becomes a self-defeating worldview because in order to defend it, one would have to cease to be a Naturalist. The only way a Naturalist can argue for the viability of his system by logical reasoning is to step outside of it in order to escape the determinism. Otherwise, all the Naturalist's reasoning is also determined, like everything else in the system, and cannot be trusted. Likewise, I would argue that Calvinistic determinism is also self-defeating. For, the only way a Calvinist can rationally defend his position on the problem of evil is to cease to be a Calvinist and to propose a position supporting a libertarian conception of free will.<sup>52</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

On the one hand, the Reformed theologian speaks of man in terms of God's providence as completely and totally controlled and determined, as if free will were impossible. On the other hand, he blames sin and evil on man as a result of his free will. This is theologically inconsistent and philosophically unsound. It is nothing more than the old attempt to "have one's cake and eat it too." It is absurd to say that God can realize

50. "What, after all, is anything we call evil except the privation of good? . . . evil is not a substance. . . . [It] is an accident, i.e., a privation of that good which is called health. Thus, whatever defects there are in a soul are privations of a natural good." (*Enchiridion* 3:11, also see chapter four of the same and his *Confessions*, Book VII.)

51. Again, to quote Augustine on this matter: "I inquired then what villainy might be, but I found no substance, only the perversity of a will twisted away from you, God, the supreme substance, toward the depths—a will that throws away its life within and swells with vanity abroad" (*Confessions*, Book VII:16, 22).

52. It may be possible to argue that the moral dilemma is not the only problem for Calvinism; similar to what Lewis raises in his attack on Naturalism's determinism. But, the matter of reasoning may also be a problem for the Calvinist. As Lewis explains, reason entails genuine freedom of thought, and so argues that Naturalism cannot provide us grounds for trusting our reasoning (not even our arguments for Naturalism!). However, if our thoughts, as well as our actions, are determined by God, as Calvinism seems to suggest, then it would appear that we would have a problem trusting our reasoning capabilities. Sure, we believe God is good and would thus determine us to think rationally, but even this belief is based on an appeal to reason. Any appeal to reason in a deterministic system simply cannot be made unless one steps outside the system. Thus, how can the Calvinist trust his reasoning faculties?

such a state of affairs simply because he is sovereign. Lewis makes this clear when he writes,

If you choose to say "God can give a creature free will and at the same time withhold free will from it," you have not succeeded in saying anything about God: meaningless combinations of words do not suddenly acquire meaning simply because we prefix to them the two other words "God can."<sup>53</sup>

If a theological system gets it wrong from the very first scene of the drama, then what profit is there in trying to salvage whatever is left of its story? This holds true, particularly considering that each act thereafter is dependent upon how everything began in the first place. To the contrary, one must begin anew. Wipe the slate clean. "Go back to the drawing board," as they say, just as one needs to do after having gone wrong in an arithmetic problem. Adding more math signs and doing further calculation becomes futile at this point. Rather, the problem should be given a *new* approach, starting from the very beginning. Thus, the Calvinist, obligated to resolve this tension between the existence of both God and evil within his system of determinism, needs to resharpen his pencils.

Furthermore, the commonplace appeal to mystery within Calvinist circles as a solution to the problem is no more than an appeal to ignorance. Ignorance cannot and must not be our grounds or foundation for understanding God's divine plan for humanity. Who God is, his divine plan for humanity—these are essential foundations for our understanding of all we know about reality, including the very possibility of knowing anything at all. They influence all our beliefs concerning theology, metaphysics, epistemology, anthropology, and ethics. The entirety of Scripture, following the creation account, is itself rooted in that very account and in what took place at the beginning of time. The whole of redemptive history rests on a proper understanding of God's character. If we are mistaken on the character of God and his divine plan for his creatures, then the inferences we draw concerning everything else will lead us away from the best explanations. Consequently, the foundation for our belief system cannot be rooted in an ineffable mystery, within which the Calvinist grounds God's decrees concerning the fate of man and the existence of sin and evil. Rather, an alternative system must be chosen, one that has more to offer.

Without intending to sound presumptuous, I wish to make it clear that I am not merely proposing a challenge for the Calvinist to supply a

53. C. S. Lewis, *Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 18.

rational solution for this critical predicament of Reformed theology. On the contrary, I am *professing* that Reformed theology is incapable of providing such a solution because of the blatant contradiction within, and the heretical implications of, its system. This problem for Reformed theology is irremediable. Berkhof admitted above that if it could be shown that his system makes God the author of sin, then this would be an “insuperable objection”—and indeed it is. The only way to avoid the contradiction is to reject determinism and opt for libertarian free will.<sup>54</sup> However, this would entail the discarding of Reformed theology because it is caught in the trap of its own determinism.

When judging between competing systems of thought on questions of ultimate reality, one must practice the principle of inference to the best explanation. This principle can be defined as “accepting a statement because it is the best available explanation of one’s evidence; deriving the conclusion that best explains one’s premises.”<sup>55</sup> It is not my intention at the present time to offer this alternative best explanation, although I do believe it is presently available. Rather, my purpose in this study is to point out the dire need for another way.

54. Some have proposed compatibilism, or soft determinism, as an alternative to hard determinism (the kind discussed in this paper). But, this is not a viable option. Compatibilism logically leads to hard determinism. Compatibilism is the view that man can be both free and determined at the same time. It is argued that man chooses what action to take based on his own strongest desire, while God influences this desire to his appointed end. Accordingly, it is believed that man wills what he, in fact, desires to perform freely, though what he wills is determined by God. However, this only pushes the problem of determinism one step back. All the compatibilist has done is to introduce an intermediary element in the causal chain, that is another domino in the series, that being man’s desires. These desires are determined to be what they are by God and are only proximate, not primary causes. Thus, we are still left with the problem that the only reason man desires to act in a certain way is that God has determined him to do so. This view of freedom excludes any notion of self-determination. Unless self-determination is upheld, man cannot be said to determine his sinful choices. Rather, God remains the primary agent. Therefore, compatibilism does not work, and the only remaining options are either hard determinism or libertarianism.

55. Honderich, 407.