

## WE BELIEVE IN GOD'S SOVEREIGN GOODNESS: A REJOINDER TO JOHN PIPER

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### I. INTRODUCTION

I am grateful to John Piper for his helpful response. Due to my immense respect and appreciation for him as a pastoral theologian and indeed as a man of God, I am also grateful to be of some small measure of help to him in pushing him to clarify—or perhaps even modify—his views on these important matters. In that spirit, in what follows I will press a bit further. This much is now very clear: Piper unmistakably affirms divine aseity. But there are, alas, still some important issues that are not so clear.

### II. REMAINING QUESTIONS

Piper says that the divine impulse to create “was not from weakness” (p. 228). He wants to “affirm as strongly as [he] can that God’s act of creation was not constrained by anything outside him, nor was the inner impulse to create owing to deficiency or defect” (p. 228). He also says that “if and when God creates . . .” (p. 230), and he refers to the “freedom of God in creation” (p. 230). But just exactly what he means when he affirms that freedom of God in creation is somewhere short of obvious.

Piper also makes intriguing reference to God’s “inclinations,” and his imagery of the fountain that “is inclined to overflow” is suggestive. More precisely, it is suggestive of something that happens *necessarily*. It may well be that the fountain overflows from superabundance rather than “weakness,” “emptiness,” or “deficiency” (p. 228)—but if it overflows necessarily then it cannot help but overflow. If this is analogous to God’s action in creating, sustaining, and redeeming the world, then it would seem to best illustrate the necessity of this divine action.

So is God free to create or to refrain from creating? In other words, is he free in something akin to a “libertarian” sense of freedom? Or is God free merely by virtue of the fact that he does what he does in the complete absence of any *external* constraint or compulsion, with the immediate cause of the action internal to God and it being within his power to have done otherwise if (*per impossible*) he had wanted to? In other words, is divine freedom

something akin to “compatibilist” freedom? From what Piper says in the foregoing response, I don’t think that we have enough to know.

But his avowal of “Edwardsian-Calvinism” might lead us to think that Piper would endorse a compatibilist account.<sup>1</sup> Paul Ramsey notes that

It is obvious that Edwards (in saying that God in his volitional action is independent and self-moved yet motivated and inclined by what pleases him, while man chooses what pleases him yet is not self-moved) simply adds degrees and denies limits, and removes changeableness and other imperfections. Otherwise, what might be said of the divine will would be univocal with the account of human volition.<sup>2</sup>

So God’s actions—although free from external constraint or compulsion—are nonetheless determined. Thus God’s action in creating this world is necessary. While the theologian who endorsed this view might not say that God *needs* the world, such a theologian would not be able to deny that the world is necessary to God, nor would she be able to deny that God would not be God apart from this world. On such a view, if God exists, then this world exists. And if this world exists, then God exists.

Nor does Piper’s analogy of Tiger Woods help here. Piper claims that “everyone knows what I mean: The essence of Tiger Woods’s prowess as a golfer was expressed in that shot” (p. 231). Unfortunately, however, this statement is both ambiguous and flawed. Tiger Woods’s *prowess as golfer* has no essence—it is *Tiger Woods* who has an essence. Nor, on any tolerable account of essence and essential properties, is Tiger Woods *essentially* a golfer—surely he could have played some other sport (or none at all) while still being Tiger Woods.<sup>3</sup> And this is a good thing, for if Tiger were essentially a golfer, and if this analogy were to work for divine action in creating, redeeming, and judging, then it would work to show that God is *essentially* a Creator, Redeemer, and Judge.

So how are we to understand Piper’s claims about divine freedom? Perhaps we may summarize the options as

<sup>1</sup>Piper mentions the exchange between James Beilby and Walter Schultz on “Edwardsian-Calvinism,” in James Beilby, “Divine Aseity, Divine Freedom: A Conceptual Problem for Edwardsian-Calvinism,” *JETS* (2004): 647-58; and Walter Schultz, “Jonathan Edwards’s End of Creation: An Exposition and Defense,” *JETS* (2006): 247-71. Schultz makes some insightful and helpful observations about the relevant historical background while also challenging Beilby’s interpretation of Edwards, but I do not see that he has addressed my arguments (nor all of Beilby’s substantive *theological* criticisms, which Piper is right to see as in some ways related to mine but which nonetheless remain distinct).

<sup>2</sup>Paul Ramsey, “Editor’s Introduction,” *Freedom of the Will: The Works of Jonathan Edwards Volume 1* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 26-27.

<sup>3</sup>I here assume the rejection of the “theory of worldbound individuals,” on which see Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 88-120.

(A) Divine action with respect to creation is necessary  
(though still free in the compatibilist sense of freedom)<sup>4</sup>;

or

(B) Divine action with respect to creation is contingent.<sup>5</sup>

If (A), then we are right back to panentheism. The assessment of Edwards made by the Reformed theologian John W. Cooper would be appropriate here as well: This view is “best construed philosophically as a panentheism that borders on Spinozan pantheism.”<sup>6</sup> Historical considerations aside, we can see that with (A) comes the necessity of creation—thus God could not exist without creation.<sup>7</sup> As Thomas P. Flint points out, if all divine action is determined, and thus only one possible world is feasible for God, the line between determinism and fatalism becomes perilously thin. In response to the question, “is God causally determined to create as he does by causes over which he has no control?” Flint answers by saying

Of course not. There *are* no causes external to God which could, so to speak, set him in motion, for God is the free creator of all causal agents. Nor is it plausible to think that internal factors (relating to his nature or character, say) over which he has no control fully determine his creative activity. For if they did, then this world would be the only genuinely possible world, and all true distinctions between necessity and contingency would collapse, as would the gratuitousness both of God’s creation and our existence.<sup>8</sup>

What is this once again but the denial of divine aseity?

But perhaps (B) is the preferred option. For our purposes, (B) can be usefully understood as either

(B\*) Divine action with respect to creation, by virtue of which God is glorified both *ad extra* and *ad intra* (and thus actualized as perfect), is contingent;

or

(B\*\*) Divine action with respect to creation, by virtue of which God is glorified *ad extra* but not *ad intra*, is contingent.

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<sup>4</sup>In this context “with respect to creation” will be shorthand for “with respect to creation, judgment, and the whole process of redemption.”

<sup>5</sup>By contingent I mean both (a) that it depends upon God for its existence and (b) its existence is not necessary.

<sup>6</sup>John W. Cooper, *Panentheism, The Other God of the Philosophers: From Plato to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 77.

<sup>7</sup>And, given Piper’s affirmation that this is the best possible world, we could reasonably conclude that God could not exist apart from *this* possible world—that is, without *us* (or our sins!).

<sup>8</sup>Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 30.

Divine glory *ad intra* refers to the glory of the Trinitarian communion, of which we get a tantalizing and hope-inspiring glimpse in the prayer of Jesus in John 17. It is the intra-Trinitarian fellowship of holy love that both John Piper and I believe is shared by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Glorification *ad extra*, on the other hand, refers to the glory of God as it is beheld by creatures (that which Jesus refers to in John 17:4).<sup>9</sup>

So which would it be for Piper? I think that we can safely rule out (B\*), for this would make the glory shared between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit contingent upon creation. And not only would such a view contradict the words of Jesus himself—who speaks to his Father of the “glory we shared before the world began” (John 17:5)—it would also make divine perfection contingent. The latter notion I take to be absurd; I think that we can be confident that (B\*) is not an acceptable option for Piper.

Perhaps Piper would opt for (B\*\*). I surely hope so, for I think that there is very good theological warrant for preferring it. But if so, then we are left to wonder how to interpret his earlier statements. He (apparently) endorses the claim of Edwards that “if the attributes which consist in a *sufficiency* for correspondent effects, are in themselves excellent, the *exercises* of them must likewise be excellent. . . . the excellency of such a sufficiency must consist in its *relation* to this kind of operation or effect; but that could not be, unless the *operation itself* were excellent. A sufficiency for any work is no further valuable than the work itself is valuable.”<sup>10</sup> And he clearly affirms the explanation of Edwards that “it is necessary that God’s awful majesty, his authority and dreadful greatness, justice and holiness should be manifested. But this could not be, unless sin and punishment had been decreed.”<sup>11</sup> Such statements would seem to be more congruent with (A). How might these be consistent with (B\*\*)? We’re still not quite sure. So while I am heartened to hear Piper embrace the doctrine of divine aseity, it is still less than obvious to me just what this means or how it might work consistently with his broader theology.

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<sup>9</sup>One might wonder why I did not include discussion of *ad intra* and *ad extra* for (A). The short answer is that it is not relevant: the glaring problem with (A) is that it renders creation necessary (however divine glory factors into this).

<sup>10</sup>Jonathan Edwards, “The End for Which God Created the World,” in John Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards, with the Complete Text of The End for Which God Created the World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998), 148, emphases original.

<sup>11</sup>Quoted in John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1-23* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 215-16 n. 33.

## III. FURTHER PROBLEMS

For the sake of a charitable reading, let us assume that Piper would intend (B\*\*). Hopefully this is the right reading of Piper (although he has not ruled out [A]), but with (B\*\*) there is a stiff theological price to pay for Piper's view. If God is maximally glorified *ad intra* essentially and thus maximally glorified *sans* creation, then there is no sense in which it is meaningful to say (or imply) that *God* somehow benefits from creation with its evils and redemption. Divine glorification *ad extra*, on the other hand, is not—and cannot coherently be said to be—for the *benefit* of a God who is already necessarily maximally glorified. So it is not for his benefit—it is for ours. If so, then we should understand the ample biblical witness (of which Piper offers so many wonderful reminders) to God's jealous protection of his glory not in the first instance as if God is threatened by the possibility that we might somehow "steal" it (which is absurd on determinism at any rate—we would "steal" it if and only if God determined that we would do so). Rather we are to understand that he loves us too much to let us get away with our ridiculous efforts to serve and satisfy and "glorify" ourselves; he loves his creation and those creatures made in the image of God far too much to allow us to be satisfied with anything less than his goodness, his grace, his *glory*—the glory that *is* the holy love of the Triune God. His passion for his glory is so that we may benefit, that we may know him in the fullness of his blessed life of holy love as Trinity.

Some of what Piper says coheres quite well with this. I am encouraged to see that Piper agrees with me when I say that

It is from this essential divine love that God acts, and we should understand divine action in accordance with the nature of God as Triune holy love. It is from the freedom of this love that God creates, and it is from the sheer, utter, inexhaustible goodness of this love that God sustains and saves. (p. 228)

And Piper has become famous for his statement that "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him."<sup>12</sup> I fully agree with Piper that God's glory, on one hand, and our happiness and holiness, on the other hand, are not at odds. But these affirmations by Piper, as wonderful as they are, do nothing to address the problems that come with his doctrine of predestination and reprobation. To put it bluntly: if God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him, then what are we to make of those who have been damned by divine decree from the foundation of the world? Are *they* "most satisfied in him?" Surely not!

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<sup>12</sup>Piper states that "this is perhaps the most important sentence in my theology" (*Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993], 26).

The logic of Piper's view should lead him to universalism (recall my argument (1)–(5)) (p. 207). Given Piper's compatibilism, God could determine that all people freely do only what is right and enjoy him, or God could just as easily determine all persons to freely repent of their sins and be saved. But Piper is too faithful to Scripture to endorse (or even to entertain) universalism. However, with his affirmations of aseity, he can hardly appeal to what is good *for God* at this point. The power of his "justification of God"—at least as I misunderstood him—was that it offered an explanation of evil that was both global and radically theocentric: *everything*, including all natural evil and all moral horror, could be explained as being necessary for God because it was *good for God*. But if Piper endorses (B\*\*) and affirms that God is maximally glorified and maximally great (*ad intra* or essentially) *sans* creation, then he cuts himself off from such explanations.

Instead of universalism, he opts for the aforementioned "two wills of God" strategy. Let me be clear: the problem here is *not* that there are distinctions within the will of God. The problem is rather that his position on this issue entails that the wills of God are contradictory. To put it rather baldly: the "preceptive" will of God says "do not commit adultery"—while the "decretive" will of God says "commit adultery." The "preceptive" will says "repent and believe"—but the "decretive" will says "don't repent and believe." And then, after these wills contradict one another and the "decretive" will wins (as it always does when the wills collide), God says "you are guilty of doing what I told you not to do . . . and you are guilty of that because you did what I decreed that you would do (and could not avoid doing)."<sup>13</sup>

Piper attempts to illustrate the "two wills of God" by appealing to an analogy used earlier by Robert Dabney. In this story, George Washington is faced with his duty to sign the death warrant of a Major Andre who had committed acts of treason. Washington had a "real and profound" compassion for Andre, but he signed the death warrant nonetheless. And he did so because his compassion was "rationally counterpoised by a complex of superior judgments . . . of wisdom, duty, patriotism, and moral indignation (the wide angle lens)."<sup>14</sup> Similarly, God has a "true compassion," but this compassion "is yet restrained, in the case of the . . . non-elect, by consistent and holy reasons."<sup>15</sup> And what are these reasons? Again, the answer is clear: it is so that God may be glorified.

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<sup>13</sup>Cautious proponents of determinist theology sometimes say that divine determination of good and divine determination of evil is "asymmetrical." But until this claim is explained—and until such explanations show *that* and *how* the problem is alleviated by such a claim—it does very little to alleviate the concerns I mention here.

<sup>14</sup>John Piper, "Are There Two Wills in God? Divine Election and God's Desire for All to be Saved," in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace* (ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 128.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*

While this is an interesting story, I do not see how it might successfully illustrate Piper's theology. For Washington seems to have "played the hand he was dealt"; he responded to the unfortunate and difficult situation with which he was faced. Washington did *not* determine the entire affair; he did not unconditionally predetermine Andre to commit treason in the first place! Furthermore, Washington does not in any way *benefit* from the execution of Andre (he does it for the good of the nation—for the good of others), nor is there reason to suppose that part of him rejoiced in the execution even as another part of him was grieved by it. The apparent disjunctions with Piper's theology seem too great here for his story of Washington and Andre to be of help.<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, consider this analogy.<sup>17</sup> Imagine a parent who is able to control each and every action of his children, and furthermore is able to do so by controlling their thoughts and inclinations. He is thus able to determine each and all actions taken by those children. He is also able to guarantee that they *desire* to do everything that they do, and this is exactly what he does.<sup>18</sup> He puts them in a special playroom that contains not only toys but also gasoline and matches, and then he gives them explicit instructions (with severe warnings) to avoid touching the gasoline and matches. Stepping out of sight, he determines that the children indeed begin to play with the gasoline and matches. When the playroom is ablaze and the situation desperate, he rushes in to save them (well, some of them). He breaks through the wall, grabs three of his seven children, and carries them to safety. When the rescued children calm down, they ask about their four siblings. They want to know about the others who are trapped inside, awaiting their inevitable fate. More importantly, they want to know if he can do something to rescue them as well.

When they ask about the situation, their father tells them that this tragic occurrence had been determined by him, and indeed that it was a smashing success—it had worked out in exact accordance

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<sup>16</sup>See the criticisms of Piper's use of this analogy by Jerry L. Walls and Joseph R. Dongell, *Why I Am Not a Calvinist* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 178-79.

<sup>17</sup>This analogy lays things out in such a stark and chilling way that I hesitate to use it. But it works well to illustrate Piper's account of the "two wills" (when combined with his view of divine glory), so I shall trust the good will of my readers. I do not wish to leave the impression that the "soteriological problem of evil" is easy for any theological system; to the contrary, open theists and classical theists as well as determinist theists face the problem of hell. The theological resources for dealing with this problem are, however, vastly different for indeterminist theologies. And as John S. Feinberg concludes, "if the basic free will defense solves the logical problem of moral evil, I see no reason why it won't work for the problem of hell. . . . this defense does solve the logical problem of hell for a theology committed to libertarian free will" (*The Many Faces of Evil: Theological Systems and the Problems of Evil* [rev. and expanded; Wheaton: Crossway, 2004], 430). For further discussion see Jerry L. Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992).

<sup>18</sup>Thus ensuring that they do what they want to do "freely" (I take it that Piper is not only a determinist but also a compatibilist). See Piper's ringing endorsement of Edwards on freedom, *God's Passion for His Glory*, 86-89.

with his plan. He then reminds them of his instructions and warnings, and he reminds them further that they willingly violated his commands. They should be grateful for their rescue, and they should understand that the others got what they deserved. When they begin to sob, he weeps with them; he tells them that he too has compassion on the doomed children (indeed, the compassion of the children for their siblings only dimly reflects his own). The children are puzzled by this, and one wants to know why such a compassionate father does not rescue the others (when it is clearly within his power to do so). His answer is this: this has happened so that everyone could see how smart he is (for being able to know how to do all this), how powerful he is (for being able to control everything and then effectively rescue them), how merciful he is (for rescuing the children who broke his rules), and how just he is (for leaving the others to their fate in the burning playroom). And, he says, "This is the righteous thing for me to do, because it allows me to look as good as I should look."

Surely the fact that such a man is a monster is beyond dispute, and it would not help his case if he were to plead that he was only acting in a "godly" way. Nor would it help him if he were to change his story and confess that he really didn't *need* to do it, but that he just did it anyway. And if he were to add that he did it for the *good* of his children, we would rightly consider him a madman as well as a moral monster. But this story strikes me as being much closer to Piper's theology than his account of General Washington and Major Andre. As Piper sees things, God has a "true compassion," a "real and deep compassion for perishing sinners."<sup>19</sup> He says that "there is a genuine inclination in God's heart to spare those who have committed treason against his kingdom."<sup>20</sup> Then why does not God save them? Why does he not save those sinners whom he has determined will commit treason against him? The reason is that "God's will to save all people is restrained by his commitment to the glorification of his sovereign grace."<sup>21</sup> But since, given (B\*\*), Piper cannot claim that God does this because God in some way benefits from it, we are left to wonder how the "two wills" account might be of any help. God's work in glorifying himself *ad extra* is not—and logically cannot be—of benefit to one who is already and necessarily maximally glorified. So is it for the sinners? Is it really true that "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him?" Does God then unconditionally damn sinners to hell for *their good*? What does it mean to say—and say in a way that is consistent with such theology—that God is *good*? What does it mean to claim—again in a way that coheres both with determinism and damnation—that holy love is of the essence of God? Piper's wise and humble counsel to those who come to the conclusion that such a theology vitiates

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<sup>19</sup>Piper, "Are There Two Wills in God?" 128.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 130.



claims to the essential goodness of God is this: "do not yet believe what I say. . . . Continue to study and pray. Either you or I (or both of us) will be changed in due time" (p. 234). I think that there is ample reason to take Piper's counsel to heart.

I could continue, but since Piper concludes by raising an important pastoral issue, I shall do so as well. Consider again the problems for the doctrine of sanctification for those who hold to determinism. These are yet before us, and they may even be exacerbated by an endorsement of (B\*\*). Piper himself honestly faces up to the questions that confront the theological determinist with respect to the doctrine of sanctification:

My sin is my greatest burden. Why? Why? Why is the process of sanctification so slow? And the first answer is because I am so evil. But the comeback is: but God, your God, is sovereign. He can do whatever he wants. And if he's most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him and he cares about his glory infinitely, why doesn't he advance your satisfaction in him, cut the root of more sins, and therefore get more glory for himself more quickly?<sup>22</sup>

Piper points out that "this is an absolutely crucial question."<sup>23</sup> But how does he answer it?

Piper's answer is stated in the form of a prayer:

God, if you love your glory infinitely and you are more glorified in me when I am more satisfied in you, and if my sin is being manifest by the slowness of my being satisfied in you totally, then it must be that the struggle I'm having with my own sin will somehow in some way cause me to be more satisfied in you. Someday. And one way to conceive of it is this: I'll look back on my sin when I'm in heaven and say, "How could such grace have carried on with me?" and I'll love his grace more than I ever would have, had I made progress more quickly.<sup>24</sup>

Although Piper insists that we are *not* to draw it, he admits that the "logical inference" to be drawn from his view is that we might as well live lives of sin in order that grace may abound. He knows that his view is "terribly dangerous" because it leads to the conclusion that Christians should "go out and sin to beat the band now. You're all going to give up on your quest for holiness."<sup>25</sup> And Piper is, of course, well aware that such an inference is in direct conflict with clear biblical teaching. *Should* we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? Piper is exercised to say that we should *not* do so, but his only recourse is to issue this command: "don't bring your brain

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<sup>22</sup>John Piper, "An Interview with John Piper" in *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God* (ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor; Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 234.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*

and say, 'Okay, I drew that logical inference and now I should live a life of sin that grace may abound.'"<sup>26</sup>

I appreciate Piper's candor here. I am in complete agreement with Piper that we should *not* sin in order that grace may abound, but Piper's theological determinism leads him to what can only appear to be an outright contradiction at this point. Suppose that a Christian is convinced by Piper that theological determinism is true, and that all events that occur are determined by God to occur so that God might be glorified maximally. Assuming that the sin in question qualifies as a genuine "band-beating" sin, the Christian is faced with this conclusion:

(C1) According to my theology I should (given the legitimate "logical inference") commit sin so that grace may abound and thus God may be glorified maximally.<sup>27</sup>

But as a Christian who takes Scripture seriously, he is also faced with this conclusion:

(C2) According to my theology I should *not* commit sin.

But surely we can be excused for thinking that "I *should* commit sin" contradicts "I *should not* commit sin." Trying to live as if (C1) and (C2) both are somehow true is a tall order indeed. Surely any metaphysical system that produces these results is one that is ill-suited for a biblically and theologically adequate doctrine of sanctification.<sup>28</sup>

We know with complete certainty that it is wrong—wrong both in the sense of being mistaken and wrong in the sense of being wrong-headed or perverse—to claim that "the devil made me do it." We are just as certain that it is also wrong to say "God made me do it" or "God made the devil make me do it." Of course Piper—with his passionate and exemplary commitment to the pursuit of holiness—would never agree to such preposterous claims. But is not this exactly what is entailed by Piper's account? These are not idle considerations; as Piper doubtlessly would testify from pastoral experience, contradictions at the heart of a theological system produce imbalances in the Christian life.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>At least some sin.

<sup>28</sup>There are other problems here as well—not least of which is the challenge of trying to fit 1 Cor 10:13 into a system of theological determinism.

<sup>29</sup>This is not to deny that many determinist Christians are godly people. To the contrary, I know many wonderful Christians (and I know of many more) who are deeply pious people, and many of them lead exemplary Christian lives. When I read an Edwards or a Spurgeon, a Piper or a Carson, I am often deeply moved to know God better. I truly am grateful for their influence on my life.

But for the defender of Piper's account to simply point to, say, outstanding Christian transformation at Bethlehem Baptist Church as evidence for the truth of Piper's theology would be premature (the full implications may not be evident for a

## IV. CONCLUSION

John Piper and I are partners in the ministry of the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ. Moreover, we both believe and defend—although we understand rather differently—the doctrine of divine sovereignty.<sup>30</sup> I agree with him that much of the Christian story is “shocking.” However, just what is it about the Christian message that is so shocking? Well, not exactly what Piper thinks is so shocking. He thinks that it is both true and shocking that the Triune God of holy love determines that those creatures made in his image will commit sin against him—and then damns (some of) them to hell for this sin that they could not avoid committing.<sup>31</sup> I agree with him that this would be shocking if it *were* true, but I do not think that this is what Scripture reveals about divine action.

Yet the Christian message *is* shocking. The Christian doctrine of creation is astounding—God creates with such power, and from such love! The Christian doctrine of sin shocks us more than we are often willing to admit, for it tells us that we are far more twisted and perverted and depraved than our most sobering and “honest” efforts at self-diagnosis have ever dreamed. Again and again, somehow we are surprised to see God’s holy love expressed as wrath in judgment of sin. We are utterly unprepared for the drastic way that God acts for us and our salvation. We are astounded at the way that God provisionally uses sinful human actions to bring about both the judgment of sinners and the provision of salvation in the death and resurrection of his Son (although it is another thing entirely to say that God *determined* all of these sins).<sup>32</sup> And we are staggered by the revelation that God offered himself for the salvation of his enemies. The good news of salvation is far more glorious and far more shocking than we dare hope to imagine—the Triune God of holy love rescues us when we are powerless and hopeless without him, justifies and restores us when we have committed treason against him, offers reconciliation to us when we are estranged from him and bids us cry “Abba, Father,” and prepares us as a spotless bride for the Son. The Triune God who *is* holy love promises to cleanse us and

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few generations). And at any rate, I’m sure that Piper would agree with me that pragmatic considerations should not be the final arbiter of theological truth claims.

<sup>30</sup>I even agree with what Piper quotes from the Heidelberg Catechism in footnote 8 (much of which is beautiful indeed). Although I would offer a theological explanation of Q/A 27 (and other parts of the Catechism as well) that differs from his, I affirm what is written.

<sup>31</sup>At least in the relevant sense of “could.” But for another perspective, see the defense of (soft) determinism by John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 720-29.

<sup>32</sup>Both Molinism and (non-determinist) Thomism offer ways of affirming a robust view of divine providence while avoiding determinism. On the former, see, e.g., Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account*; on the latter, see especially Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (New York: Routledge, 2003); and Alexander Pruss, “Prophecy Without Middle Knowledge,” *Faith and Philosophy* (2007): 433-57.

to draw us into the very communion shared between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Yes, the Christian story is shocking. We are not prepared for the majesty of the Creator, the dignity and responsibility of our status as creatures, or the depth of our depravity. We are amazed by the strength and intensity of the love of the God who gives himself for us and our salvation. But there is a way of telling the story that avoids the perils and pitfalls of theological determinism, and it is one that is arguably more faithful to the full witness of Scripture,<sup>33</sup> consonant with the testimony of the broad Christian tradition,<sup>34</sup> and consistent with the moral responsibility that is essential to the Christian understanding of reality. Given the stubborn questions and serious problems that continue to plague views such as those of Piper, such an old, old rendition of the old, old story deserves recovery and retelling.

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<sup>33</sup>In my earlier criticism of Piper's work on Romans 9, I worked to show both (a) that Piper's exegesis falls short of demonstration, and (b) that his move from exegesis to theology relies upon a very questionable premise (recall *O: God is obligated to display his glory*). Since I take it that Piper has done nothing to gainsay (a) while failing to even address (b), I shall say no more about his response to my criticisms of his theological exegesis.

<sup>34</sup>Anyone tempted to think that the worries and criticisms raised here apply to the broad Reformed tradition would do well to remember the measured judgment of Richard A. Muller when he says that Reformed scholasticism consistently repudiated determinism: "there is not even a tendency toward metaphysical determinism" (*Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003], 128).