

WHEN WORLDVIEWS COLLIDE, PART 2

Calvinism Violates Aseity

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The Scriptures present God in a number of magnificent ways that are altogether unlike anything to which mere mortals can relate. He is said, for example, to be omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent—attributes that are so “supra-human” they stretch far beyond our ability to fathom.¹ Another such doctrine, which is less well known but equally important, is God’s aseity. The word aseity comes from the Latin *a* “from” and *se* “self” and refers to the property by which something has independent existence.²

When applied to God, it suggests that He is not only uncaused, depending on nothing and no one for His existence, but, more importantly, He is completely self-sufficient, having within Himself the sufficient reason for His own existence.³ In this sense, it was the doctrine of His aseity that God taught Moses when He revealed Himself as *I AM THAT I AM* (Exodus 3:14). D. A. Carson suggests the practical significance of God’s aseity when he notes:

“God is so much from Himself that He doesn’t need us... This is the doctrine that Paul expounded when he was preaching to the pagan Athenians in Acts 17. Pagan religion is filled with finite gods. Since they have their own passions, corruptions, and needs, pagan religion is essentially a matter of swapping. You scratch the god’s back and the then god pleases you somehow—he blesses you. If you want to have a safe sea voyage, for example, then you try to do something nice for Neptune because he’s the god of the sea. If you are set to give a speech, then you try to scratch the back of Mercury because he is the god of communication... It’s truly bizarre. As Paul pointed out, the living God doesn’t need you. Further still, God does not need our worship. In eternity past He was perfectly happy. You mustn’t picture God coming to Thursday afternoon rather late saying, ‘Boy, I can hardly wait till Sunday. I hope the singing is good this week, I’m a bit down.’ God doesn’t need our worship. He’s ‘*a se*’... Please do not misunderstand; God is not impersonal. He does interact with us...but never because He has some deep needs.”⁴

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Inasmuch as this is standard doctrinal fare, it is accepted by every orthodox Christian tradition. Calvinists in particular are staunch in their defense of divine aseity for they recognize it as an integral part of the sovereignty of God.⁵ As McCall notes, “any acceptable doctrine of divine sovereignty must include at least three elements: (a) God is omnipotent, (b) God is *a se*, and (c) God is providentially active in governing and judging the world without being in any way threatened by it.”⁶ Aseity, then, is essential to sovereignty. This being the case, it is not surprising that in the doctrinal lectures to his church popular Calvinist Pastor Steve Lawson begins with aseity.

“The first attribute to which we must fix our attention is the self-existence of God; some refer to it as the aseity of God. God has all life in Himself thus God is not dependent on anyone or anything...It is in God that we live and move and have our being, but God does not derive life from anything or anyone else. God is self-sufficient.”⁷

Lawson is not alone. The chief spokesman among the Calvinists of our day, John Piper,⁸ has written extensively on it as well.⁹ Unfortunately, there are fundamental inconsistencies between God’s aseity and the Calvinist understanding of His sovereignty. Calvinists understand sovereignty in terms of deterministic control.¹⁰ Their concept, hereafter referred to as S, is accurately summarized as follows:

S – God is sovereign over any event E if and only if God determines that E occurs.

They would further add:

S – God is sovereign over any agent A if and only if God determines all of A’s actions.¹¹

But if this definition of sovereignty is accepted, then it is undeniable that every horrific event to ever scar the face of human history is due to nothing else but God’s will.¹² For Calvinists who hold to S, the heartache of an infant’s death, the destruction of earthquakes, the suffering and carnage of war, and every other tragedy “happens because God determined that it happen, and that it happen exactly as it did.”¹³ Nor is the problem limited to natural evils. For the proponent of S, even moral evils, such as murder, theft, or even a Christian succumbing to sexual temptation with all the devastation such sins entail, happen according to the decreed will of God. Despite the seeming inconsistency of such a position with the Lord’s injunction to live in holiness and purity (II Timothy 2:22), or His promise in times of temptation to “make a way to escape” (I Corinthians 10:13), Calvinist proponents of S go further still.

In terms of eternal destinies they insist that while some respond to the Gospel, the majority reject it and are damned because and only because God has so determined.¹⁴ Jerry Walls has rightly challenged the proponents of S with the following argument:

- 1) God truly loves all persons.
- 2) Truly to love someone is to desire her well-being and to promote her true flourishing as much as you can.
- 3) The true well-being and flourishing of all persons is to be found in a right relationship with God, a saving relationship in which we accept the invitation of the Gospel and come to love and obey Him.
- 4) God could determine all persons to accept the invitation of the Gospel and come to a right relationship and be saved.
- 5) Therefore, all persons will be saved.¹⁵

Most Calvinists recognize, of course, that (5) is blatantly unscriptural.¹⁶ Nevertheless, it follows necessarily from (1) – (4). “The obvious solution is to deny (4),¹⁷ but to do so would be to deny S.¹⁸ Thus, some explanation is needed to account for why God determines so many horrific tragedies, including the eternal damnation of billions when He could easily avoid it by simply determining that all men love and accept Him. At this point, there are two available options, which broadly divide Calvinists into two camps. In the first camp, scholars such as D. A. Carson, Alva McClain, and J. I. Packer choose to leave the problem unresolved. They recognize that an inherent tension exists in their position between sovereignty understood as S (i.e., 4) and God’s good character (i.e., 1) but rather than explain it, they say:

“Sure, it might *look* as if a truly good God would not act this way, it might *seem* to be the case that an infinitely loving God would not determine that some people commit horrific atrocities and be eternally damned—but who are we to say anything about what goodness really is? God just is sovereign, and S just is the proper account of sovereignty, and from there we simply appeal to

mystery.” After all, God’s ways are not our ways; and His thoughts are not our thoughts.¹⁹

This *seems* like a fair move because some truths about God are mysterious.²⁰ On the other hand, it is important to locate mystery where it genuinely exists rather than to speak gibberish about God and then appeal to mystery when pressed to explain it. As Keathley notes, “‘mystery’ is not a universal Band-Aid to which one can appeal every time his conclusions appear to contradict the Bible.”²¹ Unfortunately, this seems to be precisely what Calvinists who appeal to mystery at this point are doing. For example, in his book *Why I Am Not an Arminian*, Robert Peterson states:

“God does not save all sinners, for ultimately he does not intend to save all of them. The gift of faith is necessary for salvation, yet for reasons beyond our ken, the gift of faith has not been given to all... While God commands all to repent and takes no delight in the death of the sinner, all are not saved because it is not God’s intention to give his redeeming grace to all.”²²

Arguing that “God does and does not want to save all sinners” is more than paradoxical; it is contradictory. It is not pious tension; it is theological confusion. Paul Jewett goes so far as to argue that at the core of infralapsarian Calvinism lies a rational fallacy.²³ From my perspective, this approach is completely untenable; for if the most blatant of logical fallacies can be glossed over with ‘mystery,’ then it becomes impossible to determine whether *anything* is false. If contradictory theses can be true simultaneously, then nothing can be false and the very concept of ‘true/truth’ as a category vanishes.

In light of this obvious problem many of the most influential Calvinists of our day have opted for a different route. They remain firmly committed to S but they offer a justification for all the evils, which they believe God ordains, namely His own glory. In the next issue, I will explore the problems of such an approach. **BT**

¹ Cf. Psalm 139:1-12; Jeremiah 32:17 ² Noah Webster and Jean L. McKechnie, *Webster’s New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged: Based Upon the Broad Foundations Laid Down by Noah Webster*, 2d ed. (Cleveland: Simon and Schuster, 1979). ³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aseity> ⁴ Paraphrased from a lecture on the New Testament’s Use of the Old Testament given at Union University. Cf. <http://www.uu.edu/audio/ryancenter/wordwithintheword-0409/042409-DACarson-Plenary1.mp3> ⁵ Bruce A. Ware, “A Modified Calvinist Doctrine of God,” in *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God 4 Views*, ed. Bruce A. Ware (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2008), 78-80. ⁶ Thomas H. McCall, “I Believe in Divine Sovereignty,” *Trinity Journal* 29, no. 2 (2008): 205. ⁷ Cf. Steven J. Lawson on *The Aseity of God*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IORXhhtUkS8> ⁸ Collin Hansen, *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist’s Journey with the New Calvinists* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2008), 29. ⁹ John Piper, *The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God’s Delight in Being God*, Revised and expanded. ([Sisters, Or.]: Multnomah Press, 2000), 18, 48. Cf. also, John Piper, *Desiring God* ([Sisters, Or.]: Multnomah, 2003), 44.; as well as John Piper, “I Believe in God’s Self-Sufficiency: A Response to Thomas McCall,” *Trinity Journal* 29, no. 2 (2008). ¹⁰ Ware, 92-93. ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 95-96. ¹² Mark R. Talbot, “All the Good That Is Ours in Christ: Seeing God’s Gracious Hand in the Hurts Others Do to Us,” in *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2006), 43-44. ¹³ McCall, “I Believe in Divine Sovereignty,” 207. ¹⁴ John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1-23*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1993), 218. ¹⁵ Jerry L. Walls, “John Wesley on Predestination and Election,” in *Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies* (Oxford: Oxford Univ Press, 2009). ¹⁶ Contra Lynne Rudder Baker, “Why Christians Should Not Be Libertarians: An Augustinian Challenge,” *Faith and Philosophy* 20, no. 4 (2003): 473. Baker takes the astonishing position that either in this life or perhaps at the judgment all will eventually be saved through Christ. ¹⁷ One could also deny (1), a view called double predestination. This view, however, was condemned at the Second Council of Orange in A.D. 529, and thus has few advocates. Nevertheless, so called ‘High Calvinists’ such as Herman Hoeksema and David Engelsma offer it a vigorous defense. Cf. David Engelsma, *Hyper-Calvinism and the Well-Meant Offer of the Gospel* (Grandville, Mich.: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1994), 58. ¹⁸ McCall, “I Believe in Divine Sovereignty,” 207. ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 208. Cf. J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1961), 23. Also see Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom: An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God as Set Forth in the Scriptures* (Winona Lake, In.: BMH Books, 1959), 320. ²⁰ For example, the concepts of the trinity and God’s omniscience, to say nothing of His ability to ‘read’ thoughts, indwell hearts, and to speak the universe into existence are all impenetrable mysteries. ²¹ Kenneth Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty: A Molinist Approach* (Nashville, Tenn.: B&H Academic, 2010), 118. ²² Robert A. Peterson and Michael D. Williams, *Why I Am Not an Arminian* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 130. ²³ Paul King Jewett, *Election and Predestination* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1985), 83-97.