

## WHEN WORLDVIEWS COLLIDE, PART 3

# Calvinism Violates Aseity

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In the previous article, it was demonstrated that appealing to “mystery” is not a viable option for dealing with the logical and moral problems of the Calvinist account of sovereignty (i.e., S<sup>1</sup>) for it leads to a collapse of the concept of truth. Thus, the leading Calvinists of our day have opted rather to give a justification, namely God’s own glory, for all evils, which they believe God ordains. John Piper, for example, says flatly, “In choosing unconditionally those on whom He will have mercy and those whom He will harden God is not unrighteous, for in this ‘electing purpose’ He is acting out of a full allegiance to His name and esteem of His glory.”<sup>2</sup>

Mark R. Talbot extends this same line of reasoning to its logical end when he claims: “Nothing that exists or occurs falls outside God’s ordaining will...nothing, including no evil person or thing or event or deed. God’s foreordination is the ultimate reason why everything comes about, including the existence of all evil persons and things and the occurrence of any evil acts or events.”<sup>3</sup>

To be clear, then, “when even the worst of evils befall us, they do not ultimately come from anywhere other than God’s hand.”<sup>4</sup> Obviously, neither Talbot nor Piper is blind to the emotional pain such statements wreak on those in the midst of suffering. They affirm that God has “a real and deep compassion for perishing sinners.”<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, they remain persuaded that “God ordains that what He hates will come to pass.”<sup>6</sup> Although this position sounds confused and seems to portray God as a schizophrenic, the Calvinists in this camp explain that God evaluates His sovereign decisions through two lenses. “Looking through the narrow lens, God is faced with things that bring Him sorrow. But looking through the wide lens, God sees that it all brings glory to Him, thus He delights in it.”<sup>7</sup> As Piper puts it, “God’s will to save all people is restrained by His commitment to the glorification of His sovereign grace.”<sup>8</sup>

So, in the end, there are *competing* wills in God. Something in God yearns to redeem everyone, but this is superseded by His concern to be truly and fully glorified. For Piper, God’s sovereign determination of all things (S) on display most powerfully in His decision to predestine some to heaven and others to eternal perdition is not a “mystery” at all. Rather, it is “the powerful expression of the fact that God is passionate about the pursuit of His own glory.”<sup>9</sup> To make clear how such competing objectives interrelate, Piper offers the following extended quotation from Daniel Fuller:

“It is perfectly fitting for God to work with His creation so that it will externalize *all* aspects of His glory: On the one

hand, His wrath and power; on the other hand, His mercy.

“But He has a greater purpose than simply showing the full range of His glory, for He would not be showing Himself as He really is if He set forth His wrath and power as coordinate and equal to His love and mercy. God delights far more in His mercy than in His wrath. So in order to show the priority of His mercy, He must place it against the backdrop of wrath. How could God’s mercy appear fully as His great mercy unless it was extended to people who were under His wrath and therefore could ask only for mercy? It would be impossible for them to share with God the delight He has in His mercy unless they saw clearly the awfulness of the almighty wrath from which His mercy delivers them. Thus to show the full range of His glory God prepares beforehand not only vessels of mercy but also vessels of wrath, in order that the riches of His glory in connection with the vessels of

mercy might thereby become more clearly manifest.... Thus it is surely right for God to prepare vessels of wrath, for it is only by so doing that He is able to show the exceeding riches of His glory, the capstone of which is mercy. For God not to prepare vessels of wrath would mean that He could not fully reveal Himself as the merciful God. Thus creation could not honor Him for what He really is, and God would then have been unrighteous, for in the act of creation He would have done something inconsistent with the full delight He has in His own glory.

“But He is indeed righteous, not only in preparing vessels of wrath, but also in finding fault with such vessels and visiting wrath upon them. To prepare such vessels but then to fail to visit wrath upon them would be to act with complete disregard for His own glory. God acts consistently with love for His glory only as He opposes all who disdain finding delight in His glory. If He did not act this way in the world He freely created, He would cease to be God.”<sup>10</sup>

By these lights, it appears that God would be *imperfect*—yea, would cease to be who He is—if He failed to display the full range of His attributes. Moreover, He must showcase these in the right proportions, but to do so He must place us in the particular set of circumstances (i.e., the world) in which we exist. Only creating such a world—with evil and sinful people to be damned as well as some to be saved—lets God be God. As Piper himself puts it, “The glory of God shines most brightly, most fully, most beautifully in the manifestation of the glory of His grace.”<sup>11</sup> But since that can only occur in a context of sin and suffering, the result is that “suffering is an essential part of the tapestry of the universe so that the weaving of grace can be seen for what it really is.”<sup>12</sup>

**“The problem with this understanding of God is that it sacrifices His aseity and even His holiness on the bastardized altar of His sovereignty.”**

While Piper and those who follow Him have offered a coherent and even bold defense of S, their explanation is open to rather serious criticisms.<sup>13</sup> The first is the most obvious.

#### *Selfishness is Godly?*

According to the Calvinist's "justification strategy," God's love for us is actually only a way of loving Himself more. But if so, it is not at all clear how this can be squared with Paul's assertion that *love seeketh not her own* (I Corinthians 13:5). Conceivably, they might argue that this is one of the great differences between God's love and our own. But then, what could we make of Jesus' command that *we love one another, as I have loved you* (John 15:12)?

#### *Sin is Good?*


Consider a second problem. If God's glory is the greatest good for God, then it is the greatest good, period. But then if all evil persons, and acts, and even gratuitous suffering, are *essential* to God's glory, then they are *good*<sup>14</sup> and we have no valid reason to detest them. After all, if it is the highest good that God be glorified, what right do we have to complain, much less pray for an end to the miseries of life, which are necessary to effect it? Would not to do so be to challenge the righteousness of God? It seems obvious that it would, and yet Romans 12:9 commands us to *Abhor that which is evil*. Even the staunchest defenders of S agree that sin is bad,<sup>15</sup> but given their theology it is unclear why. Although these problems appear insoluble, it gets worse—much worse.

#### *God Needs Sin?*

For example, if X is an *essential* part of the greatest good, then the greatest good is necessarily *dependent* upon X for its existence. As Alvin Plantinga explains, "Something has a property essentially if and only if it has it and could not possibly have lacked it."<sup>16</sup>

For Calvinists who try to justify S, such as Piper, Fuller, and Talbot, this seems to be true of evil. Piper, for example, insists 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>17</sup> For Piper's God then, "evil is necessary,"<sup>18</sup> and He is "more glorious for having conceived and created and governed a world like this with all its evil."<sup>19</sup> The problem with this understanding of God is that it sacrifices His aseity, and even His holiness, on the bastardized altar of His sovereignty. "God is infinitely sufficient in Himself;"<sup>20</sup> He is 'a se.' As such, He has "no need of a passage through sin and death to manifest His glory."<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Piper's God seems little different from the pagan gods of the ancient world for, as N. T. Wright points out, He "cannot escape sounding as though He *needs* sin in order to display His glorious and to-be-worshiped wrath."<sup>22</sup> This is problematic, to put it charitably.

To summarize I can do no better than to offer the penetrating insight of David Bentley Hart. The Calvinist view of sovereignty,<sup>23</sup> he says:

"Requires us to believe in and love a God whose good ends will be realized not only in spite of—but entirely by way of—every cruelty, every fortuitous misery, every catastrophe, every betrayal, every sin the world has ever known; it requires us to believe in the eternal spiritual necessity of a child dying an agonizing death from diphtheria, of a young mother ravaged by cancer, of tens of thousands of Asians swallowed in an instant by the sea, of millions murdered in death camps and gulags and forced famines....It is a strange thing to seek peace in a universe rendered morally intelligible at the cost of a God rendered morally loathsome."<sup>24</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> S – God is sovereign over any event E if and only if God determines that E occurs. To this can be added S<sup>2</sup> – God is sovereign over any agent A if and only if God determines all of A's actions. <sup>2</sup> John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1-23*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1993), 219. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 47. <sup>5</sup> John Piper, "Are There Two Wills in God: Divine Election and God's Desire for All to Be Saved," in *Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will*, Vol 1 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1995), 128. <sup>6</sup> Quoted in John Piper, "The Suffering of Christ and the Sovereignty of God" at [desiringgod.org](http://desiringgod.org) (accessed 27 January 2016). <sup>7</sup> Thomas H. McCall, "I Believe in Divine Sovereignty," *Trinity Journal* 29, no 2 (2008): 211. <sup>8</sup> Piper, "Are There Two Wills in God: Divine Election and God's Desire for All to Be Saved," 126. <sup>9</sup> McCall, "I Believe in Divine Sovereignty," 212-213. <sup>10</sup> Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1-23*, 215-216. From Daniel P. Fuller, *The Unity of the Bible: Unfolding God's Plan for Humanity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1992), 445-448. <sup>11</sup> Quoted in John Piper, "The Suffering of Christ and the Sovereignty of God" at [desiringgod.org](http://desiringgod.org) (accessed 27 January 2016). <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>13</sup> Cf. the scathing rebuttal to Piper's justification strategy in, David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing. Co., 2005), 99. <sup>14</sup> This follows from Thomas McCall's excellent syllogism: (a) If X is the greatest good for God, then X is the greatest good (simpliciter); (b) evil is a part of the greatest good for God (from Piper's theology), (c) therefore evil is part of the greatest good. Cf. McCall, "I Believe in Divine Sovereignty," 216. <sup>15</sup> Cf. Piper's discussion of sanctification in John Piper, "An Interview with John Piper," in *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*, ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2006 ), 234. <sup>16</sup> Alvin Plantinga, "Essence and Essentialism," in *A Companion to Metaphysics*, ed. Jaegwon Kim and Ernest Sosa (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 138. <sup>17</sup> Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1-23*, 215. <sup>18</sup> Quoted in John Piper, "Is God Less Glorious Because He Ordained That Evil Be?" at [desiringgod.org](http://desiringgod.org) (accessed 28 January 2016) <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>20</sup> Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 74. <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>22</sup> N. T. Wright, "Review of *The Justification of God*," *Evangelical Quarterly* 60, (1988): 83, emphasis original. <sup>23</sup> Or at least those who subscribe to Piper's justification strategy. <sup>24</sup> Hart, 99.