

WHEN WORLDVIEWS COLLIDE, PART 4

Calvinism Violates Aseity

PASTOR JOSH MERRELL

So, are we really to conclude that damning sinners to hell for all eternity is for *their good*? I think not!

In the previous article, it was demonstrated that no justification is adequate for dealing with the logical and moral problems of the Calvinist account of sovereignty (i.e., S¹) because any such strategy inevitably compromises the aseity of God. If God had to create the world in order to display the full panoply of His attributes, including especially a world of sin and evil, that He might display His mercy and wrath, then God is not truly self-sufficient, not truly ‘*a se*’. I would be remiss, however, if I failed to acknowledge that Calvinists have a ready response. Following Jonathan Edwards, both John Piper and Daniel Fuller argue that God’s aseity is not compromised under their view because “the demonstration of all of His attributes is necessary only given God’s choice to create.”² John Piper adamantly denies that what he believes “necessarily leads to the undermining of God’s aseity.”³ As he puts it:

“When I say, ‘To dispense mercy and wrath with no constraint from outside his will is what it means to be God,’ I don’t mean that the fallen creation must exist for God to be God. Neither do I mean that God is not God until he acts mercifully in creation. I mean that in relating to the fallen creation, *being God means he will relate to it this way*—in freedom from external control” (*italics original*).⁴

Daniel Fuller likewise protests, “If He [God] did not act in this way [display His glory], in the world He freely created, He would cease to be God.”⁵ Fuller’s point is that “God is not

inherently wrathful, but that given His choice to create, he must display His glory in the form of all of His attributes, including His wrath. On this response, God’s displaying His glory was only accidentally necessary given His choice to create, not logically necessary.”⁶

This is an ingenious defense on their part because it ostensibly lets them retain their allegiance to aseity without endangering their justification strategy. Unfortunately, their argument not only fails, it creates more problems than it solves.

Their argument fails because it assumes that God was free either to create or not to create (i.e., that in creation God was free in a libertarian sense) whereas their theology contradicts this. Jonathan Edwards, for example, on whom both Piper and Fuller lean heavily, says: “God does not seek His own glory because it makes Him the happier to be honored and highly thought of, but because He loves to see Himself, His own excellencies and glories, appearing in His works—loves to see Himself communicated. And it was His intention to communicate Himself that was a prime motive of His creating the world.”⁷ Further, in his most substantial treatment of this problem entitled: *A Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*, he says “it is the necessary consequence of His delighting in the glory of His nature, that He delights in the emanation and effulgence of it” (*emphasis original*).⁸ So, although God was free from external compulsion to

create, His own nature and His delight therein required Him to express it.

Even more problematic is Edward’s recognition that “there are many of the divine attributes that if God had not created the world, never would have had any exercise.”⁹ Thus, Calvinists are left to defend three propositions, which are mutually exclusive. As James Beilby observes: (1) they want to affirm divine aseity and freedom in creation; (2) they believe that God’s glory in creation consists in the demonstration of all of His attributes, including attributes not expressible without creation; (3) they hold that God must demonstrate His glory.¹⁰ There is no problem between 1 and 2 or between 1 and 3 but there is a problem between 1 and the combination of 2 and 3. The problem is that “if God must express His glory and His glory requires the expression of attributes expressible only in creation, then it follows that to express His glory—that is, according to Edwards (and Piper), to be who He is—He must create.”¹¹ Clearly then, Calvinist protestations notwithstanding, their view does entail the denial of divine aseity.

The problem is actually worse than this, however, for even if we gloss over the internal inconsistency of their position and accept it for the sake of argument, we are left with the following assertion: God was fully glorified in eternity past by the fellowship of the Trinity (that is, *ad intra*), and thus had no needs prior to the creation. The creation simply afforded Him the

¹S – God is sovereign over any event E if and only if God determines that E occurs. To this can be added S’—God is sovereign over any agent A if and only if God determines all of A’s actions. ²James Beilby, “Divine Aseity, Divine Freedom: A Conceptual Problem for Edwardsian-Calvinism,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47, no. 4 (2004): 653. ³Piper, “I Believe in God’s Self-Sufficiency: A Response to Thomas McCall,” *Trinity Journal* 29, no. 2 (2008): 230. ⁴*Ibid.*, 230-231. ⁵Daniel P. Fuller, *The Unity of the Bible: Unfolding God’s Plan for Humanity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1992), 448. ⁶Beilby, “Divine Aseity, Divine Freedom: A Conceptual Problem for Edwardsian-Calvinism,” 653. ⁷Jonathan Edwards, “Miscellanies,” in *The Philosophy of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Harvey G. Townsend (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1972), 138. ⁸John Piper and Jonathan Edwards, *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, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1998), 164. ⁹Edwards, 136. ¹⁰Beilby, “Divine Aseity, Divine Freedom: A Conceptual Problem for Edwardsian-Calvinism,” 654. ¹¹*Ibid.* ¹²Thomas H. McCall, “We Believe in God’s Sovereign Goodness: A Rejoinder to John Piper,”

opportunity to manifest His glory to His creatures (that is, *ad extra*). It is crucial to grasp the ramifications of such a position. On the one hand, if God was fully glorified *ad intra* (as per John 17:5) then “there is no sense in which it is meaningful to say 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” (italics original).¹²

If it is not for His benefit, then it must be for ours. Piper acknowledges as much when he agrees, “We should understand...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.”¹³ Yet this throws a bucket of cold water on what Piper confesses is “the most important sentence in [his] theology,” namely, that “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.”¹⁴ As

McCall so bluntly asks, “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!”¹⁵

Taken at face value, Piper’s view should result in universalism.¹⁶ After all, given his commitment to (S) it is undeniable that God could determine all persons to accept the invitation of the Gospel and come into a right relationship with Him and be saved. Moreover, given God’s passion for His glory and the premise that He is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him, the logical conclusion is that all will be saved. Nevertheless, Piper rejects such a conclusion.¹⁷ However, with his affirmations of aseity, he can no longer appeal to what is good *for God* to explain evil. This appeared to be the benefit of his justification strategy, which was explored in the previous article, but if that is jettisoned in favor of the view that God was already fully glorified *prior* to Creation, then such an appeal is no longer an option. Thus, rather than universalism, Piper prefers to see two wills in God.¹⁸

“The problem here, however, 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 boldly: the “perceptive” will of God says “do not commit adultery,” while the “decretive” will of God says “commit adultery.” The “perceptive” 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’re 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).”¹⁹

When pressed about this, Piper explains that although God has “a real and deep compassion for perishing sinners...a genuine inclination to spare those who have committed treason against his kingdom...God’s will is restrained by His commitment to the glorification of His sovereign grace.”²⁰ But, if we accept his affirmation of aseity as genuine, then it is difficult to see how his two wills approach solves the problem. God’s work in glorifying Himself *ad extra* cannot be for *His* benefit. So, are we really to conclude that damning sinners to hell for all eternity is for *their* good? I think not!

Wholly apart from the fate of the lost, a similar problem arises in connection with the sanctification of the saved. Piper himself raises the obvious question, namely, if God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him and He cares about His glory infinitely, “Why? Why? Why is the process of sanctification so slow?”²¹ Piper answers his own question with 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 grace have carried on with me?’ And I’ll love his grace more than I ever would have, had I made progress more quickly.”²²

Piper recognizes that the inescapable conclusion to be drawn from such a prayer is that Christians ought to “go out and sin to beat the band.”²³ On the other hand, he plainly recognizes that Scripture explicitly repudiates such an idea. In other words, given the legitimate logical inference of his Calvinist theology we *should* commit sin so that grace may abound and thus God may be glorified maximally. But at the same time, we *should not* commit sin. I hope I can be forgiven for saying this makes no sense. Contradictions such as these at the heart of a theological system not only produce “imbalances in the Christian life,”²⁴ from my perspective, they render it completely false. **BT**

“This is an ingenious defense on their part because it ostensibly lets them retain their allegiance to aseity without endangering their justification strategy.”

Trinity Journal 29, no. 2 (2008): 239. ¹³Piper, “I Believe in God’s Self-Sufficiency: A Response to Thomas McCall,” 228. ¹⁴John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad!: The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1993), 26. ¹⁵McCall, “We Believe in God’s Sovereign Goodness: A Rejoinder to John Piper,” 239. ¹⁶Many Reformed theologians such as: Thomas Talbot, Karl Barth, Neal Punt, and Jan Bonda arrive at precisely this conclusion. Cf. Thomas B. Talbot, “On Predestination, Reprobation, and the Love of God,” *Reformed Journal* 33, no. 2 (1983). ¹⁷Cf. “How Does a Sovereign God Love?” at desiringgod.org. ¹⁸John 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. ¹⁹McCall, “We Believe in God’s Sovereign Goodness: A Rejoinder to John Piper,” 240. ²⁰Piper, “Are There Two Wills in God?: Divine Election and God’s Desire for All to Be Saved,” 128, 129, 130. ²¹John Piper, “An Interview with John Piper,” in *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*, ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2006), 234. ²²*Ibid.*, 235. ²³*Ibid.* ²⁴McCall, “We Believe in God’s Sovereign Goodness: A Rejoinder to John Piper,” 244.