

WHEN WORLDVIEWS COLLIDE

Calvinism Is Unnecessary

PART 3 — PASTOR JOSH MERRELL

MOLINISM PROVIDES A COHERENT EXPLANATION OF HUMAN FREE WILL DESPITE METICULOUS SOVEREIGNTY.

In the previous article I argued for the most robust form of divine sovereignty. I went so far as to suggest that God exercises meticulous sovereignty over all events, including those involving moral agents. This raises a profound question. If God indeed exercises this degree of sovereignty over His creation, how then can men have genuine free will? Applied to the most

pertinent example, namely salvation, we might ask, is salvation of God or of man? The Scriptures declare that “salvation is of the Lord” (Jonah 2:9). Jesus went so far as to insist, *No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him* (John 6:44). On the other hand, Peter assures us that God is *not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance* (II Peter 3:9). Moreover, Paul affirms that *God will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth* (I Timothy 2:4). These verses

appear contradictory. Indeed the entire Calvinist, Arminian debate revolves around their seemingly irreconcilable implications. If God indeed exercises meticulous sovereignty over every aspect of life, including those involving agents, then in what meaningful sense can He say, *I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth... wherefore turn yourselves, and live* (Ezekiel 18:32)? It would seem that something has to give somewhere. Either one must give up genuine freedom and

become a determinist, or, if one wishes to embrace libertarian freedom, one must give up a large measure of sovereignty. It is at this point that Molinism with its account of middle knowledge¹ is especially helpful. The Molinist account satisfactorily explains both positions.

GOD USES MIDDLE KNOWLEDGE IN A SOVEREIGN WAY

On the one hand, Molinism contends that God uses middle knowledge in an active sovereign way.² Consider for example that from a potentially vast array of possible worlds, God determined to create the particular world in which we live.³ He had no obligation to create at all, still less to instantiate the unique circumstances in which we find ourselves. Yet, He did so with full awareness of who would and who would not respond to His grace. God knew that much of His creation—men and women made in His very image—would ultimately be separated from Him, eternally enduring the agonies of Hell, and still He chose to create them.⁴ It would be difficult to fathom a more profound expression of sovereignty than that. But, since it is true that God has freely chosen to create this world, it is also necessarily true that persons are *elect according to the foreknowledge of God* (I Peter 1:2).

GOD KNOWS BUT DOES NOT CAUSE OUR DECISIONS

On the other hand, “the Molinist model presents an asymmetric relationship between God and the two classes of people, the elect and the reprobate.”⁵ God does not *cause* our future decisions; they are undetermined. He does, however, *know* them. So, although we are free to determine our response to any given situation, we cannot escape God’s foreknowledge of those decisions. God is like an infallible barometer. Just as such a barometer would in no wise control the weather but rather predict it infallibly, God in no way determines men’s actions or wills, yet in His middle knowledge, He foreknows them with absolute certainty. Moreover, in His goodness, God provides optimal grace so as to bring about the salvation of every person in the world.⁶ Therefore, the only reason the reprobate are not “elected” to life is that they freely ignore or reject the gracious helps that God provides. Their damnation is, therefore, entirely their own fault.⁷ Keathley offers the following helpful illustration:

“If you are committed to a ‘strong’ view of providence...and yet you also wish to maintain a libertarian conception of free will—if this is what you want, then Molinism is the only game in town”

“Imagine waking up to find you are being transported by an ambulance to the emergency room. It is clearly evident that your condition requires serious medical help. If you do nothing you will be delivered to the hospital. However, if for whatever reason you demand to be let out, the driver will comply. He may express regret and give warnings, but he will still let you go. You receive no credit for being taken to the hospital, but you incur the blame for refusing the services of the ambulance.”⁸

As this illustration makes clear, the injured patient need not *do* anything to arrive at the hospital. In fact, the only contribution he is in a position to make is to resist. This is a fitting metaphor for the work of the Spirit in conversion. If a person believes, it is because the Holy Spirit convicted and brought him to faith. If he does not believe, however, it is only because he resisted. Thus, the ambulatory model provides for a monergistic work of grace but at the same time leaves room for the sinner to refuse to accept.⁹ As Cross puts it, “Damnation is, and salvation is not, something which is brought about by the creature.”¹⁰ To summarize, we are free to choose as we wish, but not free to escape

God’s infallible foreknowledge of our decisions. Thus, when God made the sovereign choice to bring this world into existence, He rendered certain but did not cause the destruction of those He knew would reject His overtures of grace. According to Molinism, we are free to determine our response to any given setting, but God decided the setting in which we actually find ourselves.¹¹ As Craig has so eloquently stated, “It is up to God whether we find ourselves in a world in which we are predestined, but it is up to us whether we are predestined in the world in which we find ourselves.”¹² For reasons such as these, it is little wonder that

William Hasker concedes, “If you are committed to a ‘strong’ view of providence...and yet you also wish to maintain a libertarian conception of free will—if this is what you want, then Molinism is the only game in town.”¹³ In the next article, I will set forth two of the biggest benefits of the Molinist approach. **BT**

¹By middle knowledge, God knows infallibly the truth value of counterfactuals, i.e., what we *would* do if we were to face a different set of circumstances than we will, in fact, face. ²Kenneth Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty: A Molinist Approach* (Nashville, Tenn.: B&H Academic, 2010), 155.

³Presumably, given His nature, God chose to actualize the particular world in which we live because it was the ‘best’ of all available options. At a minimum the ‘best’ world would be one in which not only is God’s plan accomplished, and men are free, but also that the highest number and ratio of persons be saved rather than lost. Cf. Stephen Grover, “Why Only the Best Is Good Enough,” *Analysis* 48 (10/01/1988): 224, <http://aaron.swbts.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=phl&AN=PHL1160151&site=ehost-live> (Subscriber access). “By ‘create’ is not meant that each individual is a unique instance of special creation. My point is simply that by instantiating a world in which He knew certain persons would eventually exist, God is responsible for their creation.” ⁴Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty: A Molinist Approach*, 154. ⁵Jerry L. Walls, “Is Molinism as Bad as Calvinism,” *Faith and Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (1990): 92, <http://aaron.swbts.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rft&AN=ATLA0000825191&site=ehost-live> (Subscriber access). ⁶William Lane Craig, “Middle Knowledge, a Calvinist-Arminian Rapprochement,” in *The Grace of God, the Will of Man: A Case of Arminianism*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1989), 156. Granted, this results in the rather strange consequence of contingent creatures having counterfactual power over the past. But is this all that strange? All it amounts to is that, were someone to decide differently, God’s middle knowledge would have been different.

⁷Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty: A Molinist Approach*, 154. ⁸Ibid. ⁹Richard Cross, “Anti-Pelagianism and the Resistibility of Grace,” *Faith and Philosophy* 22, no. 2 (2005): 206-07, <http://www.pdcnet.org/faithphil> (Subscriber access); <http://aaron.swbts.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rft&AN=ATLA0001539294&site=ehost-live> (Subscriber access). ¹⁰Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty: A Molinist Approach*, 154. ¹¹William Lane Craig, “Middle Knowledge, a Calvinist-Arminian Rapprochement,” in *The Grace of God, the Will of Man: A Case of Arminianism*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1989), 157. ¹²William Hasker, “Response to Thomas Flint,” in *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press), 76.

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