

WHEN WORLDVIEWS COLLIDE

Calvinism Is Unnecessary

PART 4 — PASTOR JOSH MERRELL

MOLINISM SHIELDS GOD’S CHARACTER FROM CHARGES OF CAPRICIOUS MALEVOLENCE

A significant problem with determinist theories of providence, which root God’s sovereignty in His *will*, is that they inevitably paint Him in a bad light. Indeed, “if God is made the author of human action, then God is bound to be responsible for evil.”¹ Some are not afraid to affirm that this is, in fact, the case.² But if it is, then it results in the notion that God is angry at sins He Himself causes—an extremely puzzling situation to say the least.³ To avoid such a bizarre consequence, determinists frequently assert that although a person may be determined, she is still morally responsible for her actions so long as she is doing what she wants to do—a position termed compatibilism.⁴ John Feinberg, for example, says flatly, “...determinists must either reject freedom altogether or accept compatibilism.”⁵

Such a move does not help the situation, however, for, if God determines what people *want* to do—as compatibilism alleges—then He is still ultimately responsible for their behavior. But, if this is so, it once again raises “profound questions about the problem of evil.”⁶ Specifically, “...it seems virtually impossible to clear God of the charge that He is a direct cause of evil.”⁷ Moreover, compatibilism creates another problem—one much harder to solve; namely, if any form of compatibilism is allowed, then we are forced inescapably to conclude that God could have determined all men to “freely” (in the compatibilist sense) desire and do only what was morally right. But, if God could have selected all men to spend eternity with Him in heaven and chose rather to select only some, damning the rest to suffer the “vengeance of eternal fire,” then God seems nothing short of capricious and cruel. In fact, it makes God worse than the devil. Thus, some determinists just argue that God has overriding considerations that morally justify the evil He causes; namely His glory.⁸ Daniel Fuller, for example, states openly:

“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...”

Even if one grants Fuller’s point, it does nothing to assuage the problem; indeed, it compounds it. For, if such

a proposition is accepted, it leads not only to the view that God is a quasi-schizophrenic who both causes and detests sin but also to the conclusion that God needs sin to be glorified. As N.T. Wright concludes, this sort of theology “cannot escape sounding as though God *needs* sin in order to display his glorious and to-be-worshiped wrath.”¹⁰ But if so, it seems to fly in the face of both God’s aseity and His holiness. This is more than problematic.

“Compromising divine aseity for the sake of a particular formulation of the doctrine of divine sovereignty seems hopeless—it is much like cutting off one’s arm to save one’s hand. And compromising divine holiness for the sake of such a formulation is more akin to cutting out one’s heart to save one’s hand!”¹¹

Molinism beautifully avoids each of these moral and philosophical quagmires by simply rooting God’s sovereignty in His *omniscience*. God can thereby offer salvation sincerely, and yet know with certainty those who will or will not accept it.

MOLINISM PLACES MYSTERY WHERE IT BELONGS

It should go without saying that God is beyond finite comprehension. It is altogether unclear, for example, what we mean when we say that God is omnipresent. “We do not think He is spread out in space the way I am spread out when I lie down for a nap on the couch.”¹² On the other hand, it seems illogical to say that God is wholly present in different places simultaneously. To be sure, many cogent theories of what it means to be omnipresent exist, but in the end, it may be best to concede that we just do not know how some things work. Some truths about God are mysterious.

‘Mystery’ is thus a viable retreat, and to it all theologians eventually have to appeal. But 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.”¹³ It is important to start with this understanding because, faced with the difficulty of reconciling determinism with God’s perfect character, Calvinists frequently appeal to ‘mystery.’ J.I. Packer, for example, says, “The reality of human moral agency and responsibility in a world where God is Lord is one of the mysteries of creation, which we reverently acknowledge, but do not pretend fully to understand.”¹⁴ However, the problem is not mysterious. It is one of logical contradiction. This fact is well illustrated by Peterson, who states:

“God does not save all sinners, for ultimately he does not

“‘Mystery’ is not a universal Band-Aid to which one can appeal every time his conclusions appear to contradict the Bible.”

¹⁴Petr Dvorák, “The Concurrentism of Thomas Aquinas: Divine Causation and Human Freedom,” *Philosophia: Philosophical Quarterly of Israel* 41, no. 3 (2013): 617.

²R. C. Sproul, *Almighty over All: Understanding the Sovereignty of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1999), 51, 57.

³Jerry L. Walls, “Why No Classical Theist, Let Alone Orthodox Christian, Should Ever Be a Compatibilist,” *Philosophia Christi* 13, no. 1 (2011): 95.

⁴Lynne Rudder Baker, “Why Christians Should Not Be Libertarians: An Augustinian Challenge,” *Faith and Philosophy* 20, no. 4 (2003): 471.

⁵John S. Feinberg, “God Freedom and Evil in Calvinist Thinking,” in Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware, *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will*, 2 vols., vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1995), 465.

⁶Jerry L. Walls and Joseph Dongell, *Why I Am Not a Calvinist* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 116.

⁷Dvorák, “The Concurrentism of Thomas Aquinas: Divine Causation and Human Freedom,” 631.

⁸John 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 Bk House, 1995), 130.

⁹Daniel P. Fuller, *The Unity of the Bible: Unfolding God’s Plan for Humanity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1992), 445–448. In Thomas H. McCall, “I Believe in Divine Sovereignty,” *Trinity Journal* 29, no. 2 (2008): 213.

¹⁰N. T. Bp Wright, “The Justification of God,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 60, (1988): 83.

¹¹McCall, “I Believe in Divine Sovereignty,” 219.

¹²Gregory E. Ganssle and Paul Helm, *God & Time: Four Views* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 9.

¹³Keathley, 118.

¹⁴J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1961), 23.

¹⁵Robert A. Peterson and Michael D. Williams, *Why I Am Not an Arminian* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 130.

¹⁶Paul King Jewett, *Election and Predestination* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1985), 83–97.

¹⁷Schreiner and Ware, 381. In Keathley, 148.

¹⁸Keathley, 85.

¹⁹Cf. discussion in R. Gaskin, “Conditionals of Freedom and Middle Knowledge,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 43, no. 173 (1993): 424.

²⁰Bruce A. Ware, “A Modified Calvinist Doctrine of God,” in *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God*, ed. Bruce A. Ware (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2008), 110–111. Ware contends that the mystery is so inscrutable that God must not have middle knowledge after all.

²¹Keathley, 14.

²²Craig, *The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom*, 144.

²³Keathley, 13.

²⁴Craig, *The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom*, 119.

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.”¹⁵

Saying, “God does and does not want to save all sinners” is more than paradoxical; it is contradictory. Likewise, saying, “God can give a creature free will and at the same time withhold free will from it” is not pious tension; it is theological confusion. This fact led Paul Jewett to argue that at the core of infralapsarian Calvinism (compatibilism) lies a rational fallacy.¹⁶ Even Thomas Schreiner, himself a Calvinist, admits, “...the scandal of the Calvinist system is that ultimately the logical problems posed cannot be fully resolved.”¹⁷ Thus, some Molinists have tried to gently coax compatibilists to join their camp by pointing out that, “if a starting assumption logically compels one to a conclusion outside the boundaries set by Scripture, then the starting assumption must be wrong.”¹⁸ Indeed, it would seem that if one does not like where the tracks lead he should get off the train. Nevertheless, Calvinist critics have a ready response. “*Tu quoque*,” they cry, accusing Molinism of also appealing to ‘mystery.’¹⁹ Bruce Ware seems to level exactly this charge when he says,

“Despite the appeal of Molinism, there are at least two significant problems with it as seen from a reformed perspective. First, it is not at all clear *how* God can know by middle knowledge just what choices free creatures would make in various sets of possible circumstances...”²⁰ (*emphasis original*).

There is, however, no parallel. “Affirming ‘mystery’ is not the same as embracing logical contradictions. ‘Mystery’ and ‘contradiction’ are not synonyms.”²¹ It involves no contradiction to affirm that God knows what free creatures would do.²² But beyond that, the relevant point to be made is that omniscience, like omnipotence and omnipresence, is one of God’s infinite attributes. It is part and parcel of what it means to be God. “Thus asking how God knows what genuinely free creatures will choose is the same as asking how it is that God is God.”²³ Seen in this light, Craig asks the perfect question, “But why should I know how God has such foreknowledge? Who are human beings that they should know how God foreknows the future.”²⁴

A Molinist cannot be expected

to know how God can have middle knowledge any more than he can be expected to know how God can ‘read’ thoughts, indwell hearts, or speak the universe into existence. These are all genuine ‘mysteries.’ Moreover, when contemplating an infinite, eternal, all-powerful, omnipresent, unembodied Mind, mysteries should be expected in areas that He has not explained. Mysteries should not be expected, however, concerning the character He has so clearly revealed in the pages of Holy Scripture and supremely in His Son, Jesus.

CONCLUSION

In sum, I hope to have argued cogently that (1) Molinism preserves the highest degree of sovereignty by showing that God acts either actively or passively to produce every event in the world. Nevertheless, (2) Molinism allows for libertarian freedom since God does not cause our decisions and, in fact, gives both incentive and sufficient grace to choose right. (3) Molinism protects God’s reputation by rooting His sovereignty in His intellect rather than laying the blame for sinful acts and decisions at His feet as when it is rooted in His will. (4) Molinism appeals to ‘mystery’ only where it genuinely exists rather than attempting to hold in tension blatant logical contradictions. **BT**

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