

Reformed Defences of God's Righteousness in Ordaining the Fall. Part One

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Abstract

Predestination has consistently been a non-negotiable of Reformed and Augustinian theology. But it raises theological and apologetic questions which many have struggled to tackle. How does God relate to evil if he foreordains it? Is he the author of evil? What sort of freedom did Adam have? What does it mean in Reformed thought for God to 'permit' evil? How do we answer the unbeliever who questions the justice of a predestining God? A full theodicy is beyond the scope of one article. Working from the assumption that God predestined the Fall of Adam, this article will seek to explore the Reformed defences of God's righteousness in doing that. It will set out both God's moral and metaphysical distance from evil, without compromising his sovereignty and foreordination of it.

Introduction

The problem of evil has been called the "rock of atheism;" once the atheist has taken up his position on it, he considers himself

unassailable.¹ The problem is a simple syllogism: 1) An omnipotent God can prevent evil; 2) A good God wants to prevent evil; 3) Evil exists;² 4) Therefore God is either not omnipotent or not good. Thus, from the Bible onwards, Christian thinkers have tried to provide 'a *theodicy*, a "justification of God".³ This study is not a full theodicy.

Within the problem of evil exist many other questions. In Autumn 2005, I was one of a class studying the doctrine of original sin through the eyes of Augustine and Jonathan Edwards. This doctrine answers many of the questions posed in a Christian theodicy. In a Reformed framework, original sin accounts for natural evil – the curse on creation resulting from moral evil, a punishment to the unrighteous and discipline to the righteous⁴ – and moral evil – the result of fallen human nature, bound in total depravity, given over to sin by God as a righteous act of judgement. However, repeatedly in this class, the doctrine of original sin raised other questions with less satisfactory answers: Where did the first sin come from? How did it happen? Why did it happen? What is God's relationship to it?

These questions arise inevitably from a Reformed understanding of original sin. First, '[God] is deemed omnipotent... because, governing heaven and earth by his providence, he so regulates all things that nothing takes place without his deliberation.'⁵ These 'all things' include sin and evil. 'Reformed theologians all agree that sin and punishment are willed and determined by God.'⁶ Thus even the Fall of Adam was ordained by God: 'The decree is dreadful indeed, I confess.'⁷

Secondly, Adam was innocent in his creation, immature certainly, but righteous nevertheless. He did not have a fallen nature to which

¹ Henri Blocher, *Evil and the Cross: Christian thought and the problem of evil* (trans. David Preston; Leicester: IVP, 1994), 9.

² John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (vol. 2 of *A Theology of Lordship*; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002), 160.

³ Blocher, *Evil*, 9 (author's italics).

⁴ Frame, *DG*, 161.

⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; 2 vols; LCC 20-21; Philadelphia, Pa.: The Westminster Press, 1960), I.xvi.3 (1:200).

⁶ Herman Bavinck, *God and Creation* (vol. 2 of *Reformed Dogmatics*; ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2004), 387.

⁷ Calvin, *Inst.*, III.xxiii.7 (2:955).

can be ascribed the inclination towards his first sin. He did possess godly inclinations to direct him towards the good. Yet he fell.

Thirdly, God unreservedly hates and disapproves of sin and evil. Though part of our argument will be that he ordains and uses sin for good ends, this does not modify the wickedness of sin.

Finally, God is unqualifiedly good. He is perfect and the very definition of goodness. He cannot sin. 'The will of God is the cause of all things that happen in the world; and yet God is not the author of evil.'⁸

There is a regression of questions in this problem of evil, always tending toward those which are more difficult to answer. Whence evil? Original sin. How did original sin arise? From the Fall of Adam. How did the unfallen, righteous Adam fall? Through the tempting of Satan. How did the unfallen angel, created in righteousness with far greater natural advantages and aids to holiness than Adam fall to become Satan? Eventually, the Reformed answer, unwilling to offer the unsatisfactory, incoherent and unbiblical free-will defence,⁹ must be: God willed it in some way.

Why then should we concentrate on the Fall of Adam? Once original sin has entered the fray answers become superficially easier, but at a deeper level they usually resolve back to the first sin and its origin. The fall of Satan, while truly primal, is too mysterious. The biblical data, and indeed the historical reflection of the church, provides too little information, both about Satan's fall itself, and about the nature and protological moral condition of angels to make this a promising avenue for exploration in comparison to the significant teaching about Adam and human moral consciousness in both Old and New Testaments. Emotionally, Adam's Fall is also more central to our concerns as it is that Fall in which all humanity is implicated in guilt.

We write unapologetically within an Augustinian-Reformed framework, believing that to be the most faithful to Scripture and the most consistent position in the history of the church. Also, we write from this position as it is this question which poses the greatest

⁸ Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God* (trans. John K. S. Reid; London: James Clarke, 1961), 169.

⁹ Blocher, *Evil*, 63-4.

difficulty and obscurity, not to mention potential inconsistency, to the Reformed faith. This approach means certain criticisms will be irrelevant and ignored. For example, the accusation that a position entails the abolition of human liberty of indifference, or suggests that God has predestined a particular individual for eternal destruction before their creation, will not concern us. The standard objections of Roman Catholics, Arminians, open theists, Deists, Schleiermacherian liberals etc., have been dealt with far more exhaustively, capably and repeatedly in Reformed history than we could cover here. The sort of objections which will detain us are those which unveil apparent Scriptural contradiction or logical inconsistency in the Reformed system.

There are many related questions which we will not answer in full. Issues such as the nature of sin, the origin of sin, the transmission of original sin, will only detain us in so far as the outline of an answer is necessary to the task in hand.

The question under examination is, how successfully has Reformed theology defended God's righteousness in ordaining the Fall of Adam?

In response, we accept Helm's outline of two problems.¹⁰ First, there is the moral problem.¹¹ A moral justification must be provided for God's ordination of sin, or a moral distance argued between God and sin. We will examine this through the role of intention in ethical evaluation. Secondly, there is the metaphysical problem.¹² A distance at the level of being and action must be argued between God and sin. This we will pursue through the Reformed use of divine permission. This first article will treat moral intention and an exposition of divine permission. The second article in the next issue will evaluate divine permission and conclude.

Finally, we urge caution. This subject must be approached with humility. Berkouwer has rightly cautioned against the sinner's innate desire to excuse himself. 'Self-excuse must hasten at the heels of every

¹⁰ Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (Contours of Christian Theology; Leicester: IVP, 1993), 162.

¹¹ Helm, *Providence*, 162.

¹² Helm, *Providence*, 162.

explanation for man's sin.¹³ Further, due to the *sui generis* nature of the creator-creation relationship¹⁴ and of the nature of evil¹⁵ it is likely that we will discover limitations on our understanding. Helm observes that his aim is not to provide a definitive answer, rather 'to consider certain aspects of the relationship between divine providence and evil which will ameliorate the intellectual problem.'¹⁶ Blocher concurs: 'Distinctions that are both necessary and legitimate do not resolve it, but in the end present it in different terms.'¹⁷ He concludes with his own caution: 'To understand evil would be to understand that evil is not ultimately evil.'¹⁸

1. Moral Intention

Our first task is to provide a moral justification for God's ordination of the Fall, or a moral distance between God and that first sin. We will argue that this justification and distance is provided by the careful distinction of moral intention. In broad outline, we will argue that the moral evaluation of any action or event cannot be undertaken without due consideration of the intention of the agent(s), that is, the purpose or end of their deed. In fact, to speak of an event, like the Fall, being evil 'in and of itself' is nonsensical to this understanding. An event or action has no moral value independent of the agent who performs it. This 'doctrine of intention'¹⁹ is not unique to Reformed theology and ethics, but is common to Protestant²⁰ and Roman Catholic²¹ moral theology. Further, it is familiar to Kant²² and indeed to secular ethical

¹³ G. C. Berkouwer, *Sin* (trans. Philip C. Holtrop; Studies in Dogmatics; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1971), 27.

¹⁴ Helm, *Providence*, 163.

¹⁵ Blocher, *Evil*, 102.

¹⁶ Helm, *Providence*, 195.

¹⁷ Blocher, *Evil*, 101.

¹⁸ Blocher, *Evil*, 103.

¹⁹ Paul L. Lehmann, *Ethics in a Christian Context* (The Library of Philosophy and Theology; London: SCM, 1963), 129.

²⁰ Lehmann, *Ethics*, 129.

²¹ Lehmann, *Ethics*, 292.

²² Lehmann, *Ethics*, 129.

schools.²³ While some ethical schools might treat intention or purpose as the only consideration in ethics, that is 'teleological ethics',²⁴ Frame sets forth a mixed approach for Christian ethics, combining the 'existential' – who is performing the action,²⁵ the 'situational' or teleological – why the agent performs the action,²⁶ and the 'normative' – whether the action conforms to the norms of God's law.²⁷ We will outline the case for the moral value of intention, and then examine possible intentions which may justify God's ordination of the Fall, as well as facing some objections.

The Place of Intention

The great value of this distinction is that it shows that 'when two parties do the same thing, it is not the same.'²⁸ Thus, when Adam takes the fruit, God is not taking the fruit. More broadly, when Adam sins, God, while ordaining his sin, does not necessarily sin himself. Calvin notes in relation to Job that the different purposes of God, Satan and the Chaldeans mean that the manners of their actions are also different.²⁹ This observation is also linked to the nature of secondary causation, which will be examined in section 2. If the end in sight is morally good, then God's action is morally good. 'It is essential to realize that even though God does bring evil into the world, he does it for a good reason. Therefore, he does not *do* evil in bringing evil to pass.'³⁰

The objection that this inevitably and immediately raises is: 'does the end justify the means?' This is a vital question as human history provides sufficient evidence that in the lives of individuals and governments, the assumption that the end does justify the means has

²³ See, e.g. Paul W. Taylor, *Principles of Ethics: An Introduction* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1975), 82f.

²⁴ Frame, *DG*, 189.

²⁵ Frame, *DG*, 195.

²⁶ Frame, *DG*, 195.

²⁷ Frame, *DG*, 195-6.

²⁸ Herman Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation in Christ* (vol. 3 of *Reformed Dogmatics*; ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2006), 64.

²⁹ Calvin, *Inst.*, II.iv.2 (1:310).

³⁰ Frame, *DG*, 170 (author's italics).

led to innumerable evils. Particularly, this question has followed the announcement of Genesis 50:20. 'As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.'³¹ This shows the different goals in mind for God and Joseph's brothers. If it is argued in response that God is simply bringing good out of an evil once committed and nothing more,³² then just a few chapters earlier Joseph states, 'so it was not you who sent me here, but God.'³³ This shows that Joseph's brothers' actions were fully determined and ordained by God. And 'yet it was not a work common to both, in such a sense that God sanctioned anything connected with or relating to their wicked cupidity: because while they are contriving the destruction of their brother, God is effecting their deliverance from on high.'³⁴ Surely Calvin's exoneration implies that the end does justify the means? Blocher rejects such a suggestion: 'Is the agent not responsible for the means that he acquires?'³⁵ Even more relevantly, with regard to God's 'permission' of the first entrance of evil into the world, he warns 'if, on the contrary, God had permitted evil itself for the sake of the use he was going to make of it, then *evil itself*, the counterpart of something good, *would be explained and excused*, at least to some extent.'³⁶ Given Blocher's general sympathy to the Reformed account of evil, this fear must be addressed, because Blocher's fear is exactly what the Reformed tradition has stated, without drawing his conclusion that evil is in some way excused. Helm responds that this use of means 'would be immoral only if permitting or ordaining the means was itself immoral.'³⁷ Two other answers may also be ventured here.

First, from Calvin, God is necessarily just, therefore he cannot be accused by or held to a purely human moral construct:

³¹ Genesis 50:20. All Bible quotations are from the English Standard Version, unless specified otherwise.

³² A possible implication of Blocher, *Evil*, 33.

³³ Genesis 45:8.

³⁴ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of Genesis* (trans. John King; 1847; Calvin's Commentaries 1; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1984), 487.

³⁵ Blocher, *Evil*, 34.

³⁶ Blocher, *Evil*, 89-90 (author's italics).

³⁷ Helm, *Providence*, 204.

God knowingly and willingly suffers man to fall; the reason may be hidden, but it *cannot* be unjust... So God in ordaining the fall of man had an end most just and right which holds the name of sin in abhorrence. Though I affirm that He ordained it so, *I do not allow* that He is properly the author of sin.³⁸

This is because 'God's will is so much the highest rule of righteousness that whatever he wills, by the very fact that he wills it, must be considered righteous.'³⁹ This has also been taken up in subsequent affirmations:

If, to put it crudely, the God who defines sin and righteousness... tells us that for the uncreated Creator to cause one of his creatures to perform a sinful action is not in itself an evil thing, then where else are the creatures to go to find a standard against which to condemn the uncreated Creator?⁴⁰

Second, even if the end justifies the means for God,⁴¹ it does not follow that the same is true for humans. For a good end to outweigh any evil necessary for its accomplishment⁴² the achievement of the end must be certain. If it is possible, for the sake of argument, deliberately to enact means which are unrighteous according to a normative standard for the sake of a righteous goal, then the good that goal achieves must outweigh the evil incurred in the means⁴³ and be infallibly ensured before the evil means are deployed. This is the case with God, who infallibly determines the end from the beginning. However, no human can infallibly ensure good ends before he deploys unrighteous means. This is a criticism which has been made

³⁸ Calvin, *Predestination*, 122-3 (my italics).

³⁹ Calvin, *Inst.*, III.xxiii.2 (2: 949).

⁴⁰ David P. Field, 'God, the author of sin?' [cited 30 October 2006]. Online: <<http://www.davidpfield.blogspot.com/2006/10/god-author-of-sin.html>>.

⁴¹ We do not accept that God uses means which are sinful for him for many reasons, some outlined already here, others to be pursued in chapter 2 concerning the metaphysical distance between God and sin provided by permission. However, we will assume here for the sake of argument that God uses sinful means.

⁴² The greater-good defence will be outlined shortly and has been widely used either alone or in conjunction with others of our arguments as a vindication of God's righteousness.

⁴³ Frame, *DG*, 173. Helm, *Providence*, 203.

of the Iraq war. Even if the desire to remove Saddam Hussein and relieve human rights abuses in Iraq was arguably a righteous end, even the military might of America and its allies could not infallibly determine beforehand that this would be achieved with the minimum of adverse effects in the meantime. It is precisely because no human can determine the end from the beginning that teleological ethics must be combined with normative ethics rather than stand alone. Further, when humans act in this way, the means are somewhat relativised and thus partially removed from moral evaluation. God continues to relate with perfect righteousness to both his means and his ends. Mankind needs norms to which all means and actions must conform as well as good ends to aim for.

Thus, the fear of ends justifying means is unfounded. God's means are not sinful, because he is the arbiter of moral good, and because he acts through secondary causes.⁴⁴ Even if, hypothetically, he did use sinful means, which he does not, this would still not provide a justification for humans to employ sinful means for righteous ends.

Ends of the Fall

Having established the importance of intention in moral evaluation generally, we must now examine the specific proposals for God's intention in ordaining the Fall of Adam. A number of possibilities are offered, none of which are mutually exclusive.

1. Possibility inherent in mutability

Joseph Bellamy was a younger contemporary of Jonathan Edwards, pastoring at Bethlehem, Connecticut from 1740. He largely followed Edwards' thought, and engaged in opposition to Arminianism, Antinomianism and Robert Sandeman in the Glassite controversy. He offers this explanation, which is by no means a widespread one in Reformed thought. All beings are created both mutable and peccable,

⁴⁴ See exposition of divine permission .

with an inherent possibility of degeneration.⁴⁵ 'There could be no certain dependence upon creatures left to themselves, how great and excellent soever their original powers, because, after all, they were finite; and, therefore, must have new views, and so were liable to wrong determinations.'⁴⁶ Thus there could be no certainty of these creatures' obedience without the creator becoming surety for them himself.⁴⁷ However, 'as long as they remained innocent, they could neither feel any inclination to sin, nor perceive any force in any temptation.'⁴⁸ Thus they would not have appreciated the kindness of God, 'much less to have been so thoroughly sensible of their absolute dependence on God, and infinite obligations to him, as now, according to the present plan, the saved will forever be,'⁴⁹ if he had become their guarantee. Thus, they 'would not have been apt to have attributed their immutability to God, their preserver, but rather to their own inherent goodness.'⁵⁰ So God ordained the Fall, both as a means of glorifying his own goodness and kindness, and indeed, through the crucifixion and resurrection of the second Adam, as the means of accomplishing that guarantee. A similar possibility seems to be envisaged, though not clearly, in Bavinck: 'If matter and form are distinct, as is always the case in creatures, there is always a possibility that the matter can change its form.'⁵¹

However, there are a number of difficulties with this proposal. First, there is a danger of suggesting that mutability leads inevitably to sin. Bellamy suggests that this sinless peccability was an unstable and undesirable state which could not have continued indefinitely.⁵² This in itself casts doubt on the unqualified goodness of creation,⁵³ the providence of God and the covenant of works. It suggests that

⁴⁵ Joseph Bellamy, 'The Wisdom of God in the Permission of Sin', in *The Works of Joseph Bellamy* (2 vols; Boston, Mass.: Doctrinal Tract and Book Society, 1853), 2:46.

⁴⁶ Bellamy, 'Wisdom', 47.

⁴⁷ Bellamy, 'Wisdom', 47.

⁴⁸ Bellamy, 'Wisdom', 48.

⁴⁹ Bellamy, 'Wisdom', 50.

⁵⁰ Bellamy, 'Wisdom', 50.

⁵¹ Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation*, 67.

⁵² Bellamy, 'Wisdom', 47.

⁵³ Henri Blocher, *Original Sin: Illuminating the riddle* (New Studies in Biblical Theology 5; Leicester: IVP, 1997), 57.

creation was inherently flawed or unstable.⁵⁴ It suggests that, regardless of God's decree, the Fall may have happened anyway, so God had to act first. It also risks denying the covenant of works, in the traditional Reformed understanding of which, Adam would have been translated to angelic immortality and impeccability in due time as a reward for his obedience. Bellamy's position suggests such a translation would have resulted in Adam crediting himself rather than God for such a reward.⁵⁵ Thus we may reject this as an end in the ordination of the Fall.

2. *Presumed wisdom*

Bellamy's four sermons on Genesis 50:20 are primarily concerned with demonstrating God's wisdom in the permission of continuing sin. Thus the focus is not on Adam's first sin, or on vindicating God's righteousness, but simply showing that this is wise: 'Wisdom consists in choosing the best end, and contriving the most proper means to attain it.'⁵⁶ In the course of this argument Bellamy expounds numerous biblical examples of God's wisdom in permitting a particular sin being seen retrospectively by its outcome.⁵⁷ From this repeated pattern in salvation history, Bellamy argues an analogy with the permission of the first sin:

And how know we but that the infinitely wise Governor of the universe, when he permitted angels and man to fall, and things in the intelligent system to take such a course as they have, designed to overrule the whole so, according to a plan he had then in view, as that, in the issue, God should be more exalted, and the system more holy and happy than if sin and misery had never entered?⁵⁸

This is an attractive argument as it highlights the consistency and

⁵⁴ Blocher, *Original Sin*, 57.

⁵⁵ I am sure Bellamy would have affirmed the goodness of creation, the providence of God and the covenant of works. I do not suggest he would have opposed them, simply that the logic of his argument seems to tend in those directions.

⁵⁶ Bellamy, 'Wisdom', 23.

⁵⁷ e.g., Joseph's sale into slavery, Pharaoh's stubbornness in the Exodus, Israel's grumbling in the wilderness, the crucifixion etc.

⁵⁸ Bellamy, 'Wisdom,' 11.

immutability of God, and the revelatory link between God's nature and his acts in salvation history. It would be entirely expected that God's repeated behaviour in history should mirror his behaviour both in eternity and at the beginning of history. There is, however, an imperfection in the analogy. As we have observed, God's relationship to sin after the Fall, a sin already in the world, resulting inevitably from a sinful nature, and existing, at least in part, as a judgement by God, provides an imperfect analogy to his relationship to the first sin, at a time when man was sinless, and therefore not subject to sin as a judgement on sin. Even with this caution though, the analogy is an apt one.

3. *Greater good*

Different species of the greater good defence are common, not only in Reformed theology, but also in wider Christian theodicies and even in secular accounts of the problem of evil. The Reformed version, argues that the good God will bring out of evil justifies the presence of evil in the first place. Before setting out this argument more fully, it is worth noting that Arminians, who are often critical of the Reformed greater good proposal, and other indeterminists believe just as much in a greater good defence of evil as compatibilists—the Arminian greater good is libertarian freedom, which justifies the existence of evil.⁵⁹ For the greater good defence to work it must show that 'only in permitting evil... could certain ends be secured.'⁶⁰ Thus it must demonstrate that evil is a logically necessary condition for the demonstration of this good,⁶¹ and that there is a moral justification for bringing about the intended good.⁶² Helm offers one possible New Testament greater good. From Romans 8 and 2 Corinthians 4 he argues that suffering (for which evil is a logically necessary condition) produces glory⁶³ and thus God permitted sin to bring about glory.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Helm, *Providence*, 198.

⁶⁰ Helm, *Providence*, 198.

⁶¹ Helm, *Providence*, 202.

⁶² Helm, *Providence*, 203.

⁶³ Helm, *Providence*, 203.

⁶⁴ Helm, *Providence*, 204.

When it is suggested that the means (e.g., the Holocaust)⁶⁵ are disproportionate to the end, he responds that ignorance—our experiential ignorance of the true glory of glory—is a vital defence.⁶⁶

More powerfully, however, we may offer a greater good defence which is theocentric rather than anthropocentric. Bellamy notes that Hell 'will eventually convince the whole system that God has an infinite regard to something else besides merely the good of his creatures.'⁶⁷ So human happiness cannot be the greater good intended by God. Rather, the greater good intended is the fuller manifestation of God's glory. As the fullest possible knowledge of God is the greatest end of the created order,⁶⁸ so 'that plan, therefore, of all possible plans, must in this respect be the best, in which is given the fullest and brightest manifestation of all the divine perfections.'⁶⁹ If it is understood that 'had sin been forever unknown... there would have been no opportunity for the mighty works which God has wrought... All which, put together, will give the most full and complete, the most clear and striking picture, of the divine nature, for the contemplation and instruction of the inhabitants of heaven, through eternal ages,'⁷⁰ then God's initial ordination of sin appears in a new light. The display of the mercy and grace involved in forgiveness and atonement demands the logical necessity of the presence of sin.⁷¹ Helm summarises:

The following is a logically consistent view. Some moral evils are a punishment; some moral evils are disciplinary; some moral evils are perhaps both. But moral evils whether considered as punishments or as disciplines presuppose moral evils which are neither. In Christ, evil as punishment and evil as discipline are linked, in that his atonement is both the enduring of punishment for moral evil, and the source of renewal. Finally, without the permission of moral evil, and the atonement of Christ, God's own character would not be fully manifest.⁷²

⁶⁵ Helm, *Providence*, 205.

⁶⁶ Helm, *Providence*, 204.

⁶⁷ Bellamy, 'Wisdom', 88.

⁶⁸ Bellamy, 'Wisdom', 63.

⁶⁹ Bellamy, 'Wisdom', 64.

⁷⁰ Bellamy, 'Wisdom', 67.

⁷¹ Helm, *Providence*, 215.

⁷² Helm, *Providence*, 215.

Conclusion

We adjudge then, that the significance of intention in moral evaluation allows the possibility that God could have moral justification for ordaining the Fall, without Adam's perpetration of it being excused. The two agents, by intending different outcomes, commit morally different actions. Further, the actual intention of manifesting to the fullest extent his own glorious character to his creation, is a wonderfully just and righteous reason for God to ordain the entrance of evil into the world.

However, we disagree with John Frame that this defence, given that he rejects divine permission, evil's privative nature, and secondary causation, is sufficient alone to vindicate God fully.⁷³ It provides a moral justification, and a moral distance between God and sin, but our introduction also sought a metaphysical distance between God and sin. We must proceed now to a consideration of divine permission.

2. Divine Permission

Reformed theology has traditionally turned to the concept of divine permission as an explanatory tool for God's metaphysical relationship to sin. While our focus is on God's righteousness in the Fall of Adam, permission addresses broader concerns. 'The concept of a divine *permissio* was denied by Calvin but accepted by virtually all later Reformed theologians, including Beza and Zanchi, as a means of explaining the origin of sin and the continuing instances of sin in the course of human history.'⁷⁴ Thus permission is concerned with the mechanism by which sin entered creation under God's sovereignty, and the means by which it continues to operate. Such an account will be of value to our more specific task of vindicating God's righteousness in ordaining the Fall.

⁷³ Frame, *DG*, 173.

⁷⁴ Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1985), 222.

A. Exposition of Divine Permission

Before evaluating the contribution of permission to our case, an exposition of the Reformed doctrine of permission will be necessary. This is complicated by the field of discourse within which permission operates. Calvin counsels caution when mining the depths of the hidden decrees of God:

But how it was ordained by the foreknowledge and decree of God what man's future was without God being implicated as associate in the fault as the author or approver of transgression, is clearly a secret so much excelling the insight of the human mind, that I am not ashamed to confess ignorance.⁷⁵

In many of the treatments of permission rational argument appears to have been exhausted (not abandoned) and the case is set forth 'only by assertion wrapped in humility.'⁷⁶ This exposition will set out seven different elements included in a Reformed understanding of permission, some of which are obvious and self-explanatory, some of which are more nuanced.

1. Reformed

Unfortunately, permission is not a term unique to Reformed theology, and confusion is generated when authors fail to distinguish Reformed permission from other, very different versions. It will be examined later whether Calvin was really opposed to permission,⁷⁷ but he speaks strongly against misconceived notions of permission in his day. He writes against 'the sophists of the Sorbonne'⁷⁸ and Albert Pighius⁷⁹ in their distinctions which Reid sees picked up in later Arminianism.⁸⁰ Given Pighius' Erasmian education,⁸¹ his views may

⁷⁵ John Calvin, *Predestination*, 124.

⁷⁶ David P. Field, *Rigide Calvinisme in a Softer Dresse: The Moderate Presbyterianism of John Howe, 1630-1705* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 2004), 132.

⁷⁷ Muller, *Dictionary*, 222. Muller, *The Divine Essence and Attributes* (vol. 3 of *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2003), 471.

⁷⁸ Calvin, *Predestination*, 117.

⁷⁹ Calvin, *Predestination*, 117.

⁸⁰ John K. S. Reid, introduction to Calvin, *Predestination*, 28.

have been related to Calvin's prime target in his attack on permission in the *Institutes*, Erasmus,⁸² for whom permission 'would maintain that the wicked perish because God permits it, not because he so wills,' drawing a sharper distinction between will and permission.⁸³ In addition to Roman Catholics, permission has been used by Pelagians, Remonstrants and Lutherans 'as a "negative act," as a "withholding of obstacles" (*suspensio impedimenti*), as neither a positive willing nor a positive non-willing of sin, but as an unwillingness to prevent it (*non velle impedire*).'⁸⁴ Helm notes, then discards, a general form of permission which coheres with 'risk providence,'⁸⁵ in which God affects without controlling,⁸⁶ but contrasts this with specific permission as the only version which fits with 'no-risk providence'⁸⁷ (Reformed). Heppe highlights the potential confusion created by different forms of permission: 'Expressions of reproach at the distinction between *voluntas decernens* and *permittens* are to be found now and again in Reformed dogmaticians, but are usually connected merely with the conception of this distinction usual in *Lutheran* theology.'⁸⁸ Heppe's reference is to the work of Lambertus Danaeus, whose criticism of the Lutheran position is cited: 'Consequently, away with the sophistic distinction usually foisted by them between God's permission and His decree or will. Since whatever is done by God's permission is also done by His will, it is likewise done by His decree also.'⁸⁹ This distinction is

⁸¹ Anthony N. S. Lane, introduction to *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will: A Defence of the Orthodox Doctrine of Human Choice against Pighius*, by John Calvin (ed. Anthony N. S. Lane; trans. Graham I. Davies; Texts & Studies in Reformation & Post-Reformation Thought 2; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1996), xvi.

⁸² Calvin, *Inst.*, III.xxiii.8 (2:956), fn. 19.

⁸³ Calvin, *Inst.*, III.xxiii.8 (2:956).

⁸⁴ Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation*, 60.

⁸⁵ Helm, *Providence*, 171.

⁸⁶ Helm, *Providence*, 171.

⁸⁷ Helm, *Providence*, 172.

⁸⁸ Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics* (1861; rev. and ed. Ernst Bizer; trans. G. T. Thomson; London: Wakeman Great Reprints, 1950), 144 (author's italics).

⁸⁹ Lambertus Danaeus, *Christianaes Isagoges* (Geneva, 1588), cited in Heppe, *RD*, 145.

evident in the exposition of concurrence given by John Gerhard.⁹⁰ Bavinck, himself a proponent of what the Reformed have intended to be understood by permission,⁹¹ in places appears to reject it, arguing it is of no value against the author of sin charge.⁹² However, he clarifies that it is its misuse⁹³ and the mishearing of the word that is opposed: '[the Reformed] did not like the word [permission]. But they had so little objection to it *per se* that in fact they all again used it.'⁹⁴ Thus, in any discussion of permission, the Reformed doctrine should not be dismissed on the basis of Roman Catholic, Arminian or Lutheran definitions of the term.

2. *Asymmetrical*

The key assertion of Reformed permission is that, while God wills all things, the way God wills good is different from the way he wills evil, that there is 'an asymmetry between the way in which God stands behind those moral actions which he has decreed which are good and the way he stands behind those moral actions which he has decreed which are evil.'⁹⁵ 'A solution [to the problem of God's relationship to evil] could only be attempted by making a distinction in the *manner* of God's government over the good and over the evil.'⁹⁶ Most of the other elements within Reformed accounts of permission are attempts to explicate the nature of this asymmetry in God's ordination. We will return to the specific elements, but Blocher captures the import well:

We should note carefully that, even at the heart of the decree, if evil is willed in a certain manner, it is not willed *as* something good. God wills what is good directly, simply, for himself; he wills evil only in a different manner, while hating it at the same time. It is, to be sure, sovereign, but it is also a *permissive* will that is being referred to. Divine causality with respect to good is *efficient*... With respect to evil, it is *deficient* (*i.e.* God is

⁹⁰ Robert D. Preus, *God and His Creation* (vol. 2 of *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*; St Louis, Mo.: Concordia, 1972), 217-8.

⁹¹ Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation*, 60-61.

⁹² Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 387.

⁹³ Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation*, 59.

⁹⁴ Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation*, 61.

⁹⁵ Field, *Rigide Calvinisme*, 134.

⁹⁶ Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation*, 62 (author's italics).

content not to act, as if he failed to assist; he *did not* bring forth the will to do good, nor the deed.) Whereas God himself works good by making it work, evil is always the deed of one or of several created beings, exclusively.⁹⁷

3. *Anti-preceptive*

Obviously, *voluntas permittens* involves actions which are not approved by God,⁹⁸ and which go against his revealed, preceptive will.⁹⁹

4. *Non-hindering*

One element in the Reformed concept of permission is that God does not hinder a particular action when he could have done.¹⁰⁰ Bellamy observes of Genesis 50:20, 'nothing further was needful than for God not to hinder Joseph's brethren.'¹⁰¹ As we have observed he argues that such permission is analogous to the permission of the first sin. 'And how know we but that it was designed, by the infinitely wise God, as a little kind of picture, in which we might see, in miniature, the nature of God's government of the whole moral system, and the reasons of his permitting sin and misery to enter into the world he had made?'¹⁰² Classically, God's *voluntas permittens sive permissio* is 'that will of God whereby he permits evil or sin by not impeding their accomplishment and by not withdrawing the divine *concursum* required for the existence of things.'¹⁰³

5. *Deficient*

Of all the elements within Reformed accounts of permission, deficiency is perhaps the most difficult to explain, and therefore the

⁹⁷ Blocher, *Evil*, 99 (author's italics).

⁹⁸ Bellamy, 'Wisdom', 9.

⁹⁹ Muller, *Dictionary*, 331.

¹⁰⁰ Bellamy, 'Wisdom', 9.

¹⁰¹ Bellamy, 'Wisdom', 24.

¹⁰² Bellamy, 'Wisdom', 27.

¹⁰³ Muller, *Essence and Attributes*, 471.

most vulnerable to the charge of assertion without argument. The Reformed, perhaps with the exception of Calvin,¹⁰⁴ consider that God's will is a deficient, rather than efficient, cause of evil.¹⁰⁵ 'Defects are permitted by God, not effects.'¹⁰⁶ Bavinck insists in a causal sense that 'sin ... does not have God as its efficient cause, but at most as its deficient cause.'¹⁰⁷ If it is asked whether deficiency in causation has any meaning, Bavinck quotes Augustine as a caution: 'Trying to discover the causes of such deficiencies—causes which, as I have said, are not efficient but deficient—is like trying to see the darkness or hear the silence.'¹⁰⁸ However, some progress can be made towards an explanation of deficiency, again by means of careful definition and distinction.

The most well known of these is that the distinction between the material part of sin—the action, and the formal part—the *anomia*, combined with the Augustinian doctrine of evil as *privatio boni* meant that God could be the efficient cause of all actions, including sinful actions, without being the author of sin since the sinfulness of an action 'is nothing but a defect of operation, of which no author or efficient cause but only a deficient cause can exist.' Thus, God may be called 'the *causa deficiens*, but not in any sense the *causa efficiens* of sin.'¹⁰⁹

We will examine each of these, material-formal and *privatio boni*, in order.

5.i. Material-Formal Distinction

Two of the classical 'causes' in logic are the formal and material. The formal cause states the essence of something, what makes it what it is. The material gives what it is made from. When this distinction is applied to sin generally, or the Fall specifically, an argument emerges. Materially, sin is God's, formally it is man's.¹¹⁰ God provides

¹⁰⁴ Muller, *Essence and Attributes*, 471. We will argue against this in later evaluation.

¹⁰⁵ Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation*, 61. See also, Blocher, *Evil*, 99.

¹⁰⁶ Muller, *Essence and Attributes*, 471.

¹⁰⁷ Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation*, 63.

¹⁰⁸ Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation*, 69.

¹⁰⁹ Field, *Rigide Calvinisme*, 132 (author's italics).

¹¹⁰ Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation*, 62. Heppe, *RD*, 186.

everything from which a sinful action is made—the mind, thought, breath, power, planning etc.¹¹¹ However, what makes a sin sin, the formal cause, is the evil intent, which belongs exclusively to man.¹¹² Bavinck illustrates that murder and lawful killing are materially identical acts, but formally very different.¹¹³ ‘What makes homicide a sin is not the matter, the substrate, but the form, that is, the depravity, the lawlessness (*avnomia*) of the deed; not the substance but the accident in the act.’¹¹⁴ Pictet argues similarly that ‘God is the author of the essence of human actions, by virtue of his concurrence in producing them, but not the author of their sinfulness.’¹¹⁵ So as to prove this is not absurd, Bavinck shows that the same distinction is usually deployed with regard to faith. Materially, faith is from God, formally it is from man.¹¹⁶ Indeed, a third element may even be considered, not only the action and the *avnomia* of intent, but also the accident of God’s judgement.¹¹⁷ The former and latter follow predestination as cause and effect,¹¹⁸ while the lawlessness purposed is a consequence rather than an effect¹¹⁹ (the distinction between cause-effect and antecedent-consequent will be elaborated later).

Heppe shows that this is a standard Reformed argument:

God’s decree is sheerly the efficient cause of everything good, the effectually permissive cause of evil. For it is God who effects that which in a sinful act bears the stamp of a real *res*, namely the substance of the act [material cause], in order even thereby to reveal his glory. The really bad in it [formal cause], which has not true being at all, He merely permits.¹²⁰

¹¹¹ Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation*, 62.

¹¹² Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation*, 62.

¹¹³ Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation*, 62.

¹¹⁴ Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation*, 62.

¹¹⁵ Benedict Pictet, *Christian Theology* (trans. Frederick Reyroux; London: Seeley & Burnside, 1834), 173.

¹¹⁶ Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation*, 62.

¹¹⁷ Heppe, *RD*, 186.

¹¹⁸ Heppe, *RD*, 186.

¹¹⁹ Heppe, *RD*, 186. See also, Heppe, *RD*, 136; Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (ed. James T. Dennison Jr; trans. George M. Giger; 3 vols; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992), IV.xiv.6 (1:381).

¹²⁰ Heppe, *RD*, 143.

In context, it seems that Helm is also arguing for this. In supporting ‘*specific*’¹²¹ permission he argues ‘God ordains all those circumstances which are necessary for the performance by a person of a particular morally evil action... God does not himself perform that action, nor could he... Nevertheless, he *permits* that action.’¹²² While this may sound a little like middle knowledge, he has already rejected this avenue.¹²³ Rather, in a context of defending no-risk providence and divine permission, he is arguing in philosophical language for this same material-formal distinction.

Thus, God is the deficient cause of sin in the sense that he is the material, though not the formal, cause of the sinful action.

5.ii. Privatio boni

The argument that evil is the privation of the good has been a standard one at least since Augustine.¹²⁴ This concept is part of a discourse concerning the nature of evil itself which is far broader than the question of divine permission. However, it is an indispensable element in a Reformed account of permission.¹²⁵ To say that evil is a privation of the good is not to deny its existence. Blocher criticises non-Christian denials of the reality of evil,¹²⁶ while at the same time affirming that ‘[the Church Fathers’] analysis of evil in negative terms, as a deprivation of the good, constitutes a lasting gain.’¹²⁷ He observes the Scriptural warrant for describing evil in purely negative terms, and the many New Testament terms related to evil which deploy the *a*-prefix in Greek.¹²⁸ The reality of evil is not denied though, because ‘the fact that evil is vanity... and the lack of something good (*i.e.* privation) does not remove the weight of sin, for evil makes use of the substance of created goodness.’¹²⁹

¹²¹ Helm, *Providence*, 172 (author’s italics).

¹²² Helm, *Providence*, 172 (author’s italics).

¹²³ Helm, *Providence*, 55-61.

¹²⁴ Frame, *DG*, 163. Helm, *Providence*, 169.

¹²⁵ Helm, *Providence*, 171.

¹²⁶ Blocher, *Evil*, 13.

¹²⁷ Blocher, *Evil*, 31.

¹²⁸ Blocher, *Evil*, 31.

¹²⁹ Blocher, *Evil*, 87.

The need to describe evil in these terms arises partly from the doctrine of creation. Given that the creation was good without qualification,¹³⁰ evil cannot be a positive presence with an independent existence. Rather it is a negative and derivative existence. 'The pain and suffering arising... are real; nevertheless, they proceed from what is negative, from deformation or depravity. Evil is thus corruption, decay, deficiency, perishing.'¹³¹ Thus, the privative nature of evil establishes that it is not 'created' by God,¹³² and defends him from the accusation of being the author (in one sense) of evil.

5. *iii. Divine withholding*

A third element of the deficient concept in permission, not set out in the Field quote above, but deployed by Helm and others in this context, is the idea of 'a divine *withholding*.'¹³³ In this withholding, God refrains from bestowing the grace necessary to resist sin.¹³⁴

In part, this is established by analogy with preterition. Within the doctrine of reprobation, preterition is the negative element, contrasted with the positive predamnation.¹³⁵ Preterition is 'the denial of grace not due,'¹³⁶ while predamnation is 'the appointment of punishment due.'¹³⁷ Though not explicit, Turretin's description of preterition is couched in permissive language, such that its two features are, on the one hand, 'neglect[ing] and slight[ing],'¹³⁸ and on the other, 'desertion, by which he left them in... their misery.'¹³⁹ Again, preterition concerns abandonment.¹⁴⁰ This passing over is spoken of as a withholding because in it God withholds saving grace. If humanity is understood to be lost in sin and deserving of judgement,

¹³⁰ Frame, *DG*, 163.

¹³¹ Helm, *Providence*, 168.

¹³² Helm, *Providence*, 170.

¹³³ Helm, *Providence*, 170 (author's italics).

¹³⁴ Helm, *Providence*, 170.

¹³⁵ Turretin, *Inst.*, IV.xiv.4 (1:381).

¹³⁶ Heppe, *RD*, 180.

¹³⁷ Heppe, *RD*, 180.

¹³⁸ Turretin, *Inst.*, IV.xiv.6 (1:381).

¹³⁹ Turretin, *Inst.*, IV.xiv.6 (1:381).

¹⁴⁰ Heppe, *RD*, 180.

then preterition can be seen, in contrast to election, as a negative rather than a positive act.¹⁴¹ Thus, God must act positively in election to redeem, whereas damnation follows inevitably from the natural state of man. In this sense, election and reprobation are asymmetrical, analogically similar to God's respective relationships to good willed and evil 'permitted': 'Election is the positive *principium* of salvation, but reprobation strictly speaking is not a principle but the removal of a principle.'¹⁴² We may say that while election is the ground of salvation, reprobation is not the ground of damnation, rather sin is.¹⁴³ Turretin argues that this does not make God culpable on four grounds. First, he is not obliged to provide the necessary grace, it is within the freedom of his mercy.¹⁴⁴ Secondly, his withholding does not cause sin or peccability; rather man already has peccability (this is true not only in discussions of reprobation but also in protology: while Adam did not have a sinful nature before the Fall, he was still peccable), and God withholds the cure of it.¹⁴⁵ Thirdly, the grace of God denied is not desired by the object anyway.¹⁴⁶ Fourthly, God's intention is not to cause sin but to create a reprobate people.¹⁴⁷ This may sound specious and equally reprehensible to non-Reformed ears, but it is a significant distinction, upholding God's lack of sinful intention in any act. Turretin further defends that God's action in preterition, and more generally reprobation, is not the cause of sin, though sin is an inevitable consequence: 'Sins are the consequents, rather than the effects of reprobation; necessarily bringing about the futuration of the event, but yet not infusing or producing the wickedness; not by removing what is present, but by not supplying what would sustain.'¹⁴⁸ This distinction is at the heart of permission for Turretin as it means God's holiness is not questioned:

As if the causality of sin might be ascribed to him because the necessity of sinning is connected with the denial of grace... Between the

¹⁴¹ Heppé, *RD*, 181.

¹⁴² Heppé, *RD*, 181.

¹⁴³ Heppé, *RD*, 181.

¹⁴⁴ Turretin, *Inst.*, IV.xiv.7 (1:381).

¹⁴⁵ Turretin, *Inst.*, IV.xiv.7 (1:381).

¹⁴⁶ Turretin, *Inst.*, IV.xiv.7 (1:381).

¹⁴⁷ Turretin, *Inst.*, IV.xiv.7 (1:381).

¹⁴⁸ Turretin, *Inst.*, IV.xiv.6 (1:381).

antecedent and the consequence causality does not intervene.... Nor is it necessary that he should destine to the means in the same manner as to the end. For according to the nature of means, he is differently occupied about them in their destination—either that he may effect some things or only permit and direct others. In this sense, he can be said to predestinate to sin and hardening not effectively, but permissively and directively.¹⁴⁹

It may be observed that this analogy between preterition and God's permission of the primal sin fails because preterition, regardless of which lapsarian position is adopted, is predicated upon a humanity envisaged as sinful, whereas Adam is sinless until the Fall. However, Edwards deploys an argument akin to the withholding of preterition in his accounts of the origin of Adam's sin. As with many of the Reformed, Edwards distinguishes causal and moral responsibility for sin and turns again to permission. 'In order to account for a sinful corruption... there is not the least need of supposing any evil quality infused, implanted, or wrought into the nature of man, by any positive cause.'¹⁵⁰ 'Only God's withdrawing... and men's natural principles being left to themselves, this is sufficient to account for his becoming entirely corrupt.'¹⁵¹ As with Turretin and Heppel, Edwards continues that God is 'under no obligation to keep men from sinning; but may in his providence permit and leave them to sin.'¹⁵² But Edwards goes further in linking permission to the Fall explicitly. Edwards upholds that God is a permissive rather than a positive agent in Adam's primal sin: 'The first arising of that evil disposition in the heart of Adam, was by God's permission.'¹⁵³

There is a great difference between God's being concerned thus, by his *permission*, in an event and act, which in the inherent subject and agent of it, is sin (though the event will certainly follow on his permission), and his being concerned in it by *producing* it and exerting the act of sin; or

¹⁴⁹ Turretin, *Inst.*, IV.xiv.27 (1:387-8).

¹⁵⁰ Jonathan Edwards, *Original Sin* (ed. Clyde A. Holbrook; The Works of Jonathan Edwards 3; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1970), 380.

¹⁵¹ Edwards, *OS*, 383.

¹⁵² Edwards, 'The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners', in *Sermons and Discourses 1734-1738* (ed. M. X. Lesser; The Works of Jonathan Edwards 19; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001), 336-376, cited in Oliver D. Crisp, *Jonathan Edwards and the Metaphysics of Sin* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 47.

¹⁵³ Edwards, *OS*, 393.

between his being the *orderer* of its certain existence, by *not hindering* it, under certain circumstances, and his being the proper *actor* or *author* of it, by a *positive agency* or *efficiency*.¹⁵⁴

Edwards' account of God's withdrawing of man's superior or supernatural principles, thereby leaving man under the poor mastery of his natural principles¹⁵⁵ is of no assistance here, as it is explicit that this withdrawing is subsequent to the primal sin.¹⁵⁶ However, in *Miscellany 290* Edwards provides a case for Adam's original Fall. He introduces the categories of sufficient and confirming grace.¹⁵⁷ God grants Adam sufficient grace to withstand sin, but he withholds the confirming grace which would have made sin impossible.¹⁵⁸ This corresponds to the scholastic *posse non peccare*.¹⁵⁹ Confirming grace (*non posse peccare*) would have been conferred upon Adam had he persevered obediently through his probation, but is now reserved for glory. As with the grace of election for Turretin, so for Edwards, God is not obliged to confer confirming grace.¹⁶⁰

The deficiency of God's permission then consists in a divine withholding, God's material as distinct from formal causation of sin, and is based on an understanding of evil as *privatio boni*.

6. *Efficacious*

At first sight, to define divine permission as efficacious may appear to contradict the additional definition of deficient above. However, the opposite of deficient is efficient, rather than efficacious. We have

¹⁵⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will* (ed. Paul Ramsey; The Works of Jonathan Edwards 1; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1957), 403 (author's italics).

¹⁵⁵ Edwards, *OS*, 381-3.

¹⁵⁶ Edwards, *OS*, 382-3. C. Samuel Storms, *Tragedy in Eden: Original Sin in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1985), 219.

¹⁵⁷ Jonathan Edwards, 'Miscellany 290', in *The 'Miscellanies', a-500* (ed. Thomas A. Schafer; The Works of Jonathan Edwards 13; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994), 382. See also John Kearney, 'Jonathan Edwards' Account of Adam's First Sin', *SBET* 15 (1997): 128f.

¹⁵⁸ Edwards, 'Miscellany 290', 382.

¹⁵⁹ Crisp, *Metaphysics*, 31.

¹⁶⁰ Edwards, 'Miscellany 290', 382.

already noted the opposition and rejection of efficiency above. It may seem that to call divine permission efficacious rather than efficient is simply cavilling about words. However, the concept expressed is an important one. The efficient-efficacious distinction is also one with pedigree. The Reformed admit of '*permissio efficax*'¹⁶¹ and '*voluntas efficaciter permittens*'¹⁶² though *efficiens* is not evident as a qualifying adjective. Permission is *efficax* precisely because Reformed thought admits of no activity outside of God which is independent of his decretive will and ordination.¹⁶³ Thus, 'God's permission is efficacious, an act of his will.'¹⁶⁴ So, whether efficient or deficient, the Reformed doctrine of providence demands that everything is an act of God's will. 'The distinction [efficient-permissive] is necessary given the fact that, if God were to resist the working out [*sic*] of any finite sequence of events, those events would not occur. The divine permission, therefore, "is a certain kind of will."¹⁶⁵ Heppe agrees that 'by God's decree and will things good and bad take place; the former by efficient, the latter by permissive decree.'¹⁶⁶ Calvin applies this efficacious will specifically to the Fall: 'God knowingly and willingly suffers man to fall.'¹⁶⁷ Frame summarises the Reformed version of permission with this distinction: 'God is the efficient cause of everything good, but only the "effectually permissive cause of evil."¹⁶⁸

7. Remotely caused

The final element in the Reformed understanding of permission, and perhaps the most important is a precise understanding of moral agency, understood through the analysis of causation. With the

¹⁶¹ Muller, *Dictionary*, 222.

¹⁶² Muller, *Dictionary*, 331.

¹⁶³ Muller, *Dictionary*, 222.

¹⁶⁴ Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 387. See also, Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation*, 61.

¹⁶⁵ Muller, *Essence and Attributes*, 441.

¹⁶⁶ Heppe, *RD*, 143.

¹⁶⁷ Calvin, *Predestination*, 122.

¹⁶⁸ Frame, *DG*, 166. In context, this is part of Frame's opposition to permission. In this isolated quote, however, we consider he clearly expresses something of the efficacy of permission.

exception of Frame,¹⁶⁹ the Reformed have universally resorted to the distinction of primary or remote from secondary or proximate causes, in which is seen 'a *concursum* of divine primary and creaturely secondary causality.'¹⁷⁰ This distinction illustrates not only how God can be held righteous in ordaining the Fall, but more broadly appears repeatedly in Reformed accounts of predestination, continuing sin and the freedom and bondage of the will. Blocher observes the relationship of divine providence and mediate causes: 'The exercise of absolute sovereignty does not exclude the "relative" operation of secondary causes.'¹⁷¹ It is argued that this distinction decisively protects God's innocence: 'Between his ordination and sin there stands the proximate cause of sin which is man's will. The intervention of this proximate cause on the one hand removes all guilt from God, and on the other hand leaves man with a liability which he cannot escape.'¹⁷²

Calvin was the first Reformed theologian repeatedly to deploy this distinction in vindication of God's ordination of sin. In 1543, he asserts without great elaboration God's innocence through this distinction against Pighius' accusations: 'As though in fact, when we say that God determines everything by his choice and directs it towards his end, we do not also add that he himself employs certain methods, as it were means, or secondary causes.'¹⁷³ He shows, in addition, that this distinction is not unique to 'Calvinist' thought, but is common to the magisterial reformers more widely: 'Luther always added this explanation: all the wicked are instruments of God in such a way that the doing of evil originates from them, remains in them, and is also to be imputed to them.'¹⁷⁴ Calvin was aware of the potential objections and in later works was concerned to clarify God's control of all causes and agents. Secondary¹⁷⁵ causation does not restrict God as if he had bound himself in a Gordian complex, as

¹⁶⁹ Frame, *DG*, 155.

¹⁷⁰ Muller, *Dictionary*, 64.

¹⁷¹ Blocher, *Evil*, 92.

¹⁷² Reid, 'Introduction', 19.

¹⁷³ Calvin, *Bondage*, 38.

¹⁷⁴ Calvin, *Bondage*, 48-9.

¹⁷⁵ Calvin's more frequent term was proximate, with divine primary causes described as remote, but he used primary and secondary as well.

Calvin understood the Stoics to have taught, such that he would be subject to inferior causes.¹⁷⁶ Rather 'the will of God is the cause of all things that happen in the world; and yet God is not the author of evil.'¹⁷⁷ Calvin observes that secondary agency is God's usual method of operating: 'Since God manifests his power through means and inferior causes, it is not to be separated from them.'¹⁷⁸

Calvin further demonstrates how distinguishing different levels of causation advances our argument beyond the level of good intention as already argued. Even if God has a sufficiently good reason¹⁷⁹ how is he not guilty for committing the same deeds for which he punishes other moral agents?¹⁸⁰ He illustrates an answer with the example of a righteous military general and his unrighteous army filled with blood lust,¹⁸¹ such that not only are their intentions different, but their actions are also different and distinct.

Since the criminal misdeeds perpetrated by men proceed from God with a cause that is just, though perhaps unknown to us, though the first cause of all things is His will, I nevertheless deny that He is the author of sin.... What man wickedly perpetrates, incited by ambition of avarice or lust or some other depraved motive, since God does it by his hand with a righteous though perhaps hidden purpose—this cannot be equated with the term sin.¹⁸²

Thus in addition to having a morally sufficient reason, God also acts through intermediate agents, so not committing sin himself. Calvin contrasts this with God's immediate activity by the Spirit in working good, as he comments on Genesis 50:20. As has been observed before, he wants to maintain an asymmetry between the two relationships.

If men undertake anything right and just, he so actuates and moves them inwardly by his Spirit, that whatever is good in them, may justly be said to be received from him: but if Satan and ungodly men rage, he acts by their hands in such an inexpressible manner, that the wickedness of the

¹⁷⁶ Calvin, *Predestination*, 170. *Inst.*, I.xvi.8, (1:207).

¹⁷⁷ Calvin, *Predestination*, 169.

¹⁷⁸ Calvin, *Predestination*, 170.

¹⁷⁹ Calvin, *Predestination*, 178.

¹⁸⁰ Calvin, *Predestination*, 179.

¹⁸¹ Calvin, *Predestination*, 180.

¹⁸² Calvin, *Predestination*, 181.

deed belongs to them, and the blame of it is imputed to them.¹⁸³

It is to some extent the sinful intention of the secondary agent that establishes the distinction, such that the sinful inclination does

not hinder but rather establish second and intermediate causes, by which all things happen. When from eternity God decreed whatever was to happen at definite moments, He at the same time also decreed the manner and way which He wished it thus to take place; to such extent, that even if some flaw is discovered in a second cause, it yet implies no flaw or fault in God's eternal counsel.¹⁸⁴

Commenting on Job, Calvin notes that secondary agency actually demonstrates a difference in the manner of the actions performed by each agent. God permits Satan to afflict Job; he hands over the Chaldeans to Satan to be stirred up by him; Satan arouses the Chaldeans directly; the Chaldeans actually commit the assaults on Job's property.¹⁸⁵ Not only does each party have different intentions, but the actions they perform are also different. This is an obvious conclusion once the possibility of two actors performing the same act in the same way is posited. 'Two agents for the same act would be indeed impossible, were they both agents in the same sense and on the same level.'¹⁸⁶ Primary and secondary (remote and proximate) are not to be understood in temporal or spatial terms, as if the difference between them was merely one of priority. Rather, Helm highlights that the two express different orders or levels of causation.¹⁸⁷ This has two consequences. First, it enables Farrer to state, 'both the divine and the human actions remain real and therefore free in the union between them; not knowing the modality of the divine action we cannot pose the problem of their mutual relation.'¹⁸⁸ Secondly, it means that 'the exact relationship between the higher and lower levels of causation is hidden from us,'¹⁸⁹ therefore excusing us from

¹⁸³ Calvin, *Genesis*, 487-8.

¹⁸⁴ Heppe, *RD*, 144-5.

¹⁸⁵ Calvin, *Inst.*, II.iv.2 (1:310).

¹⁸⁶ Austin Farrer, *Faith and Speculation* (London: Black, 1967), cited in Helm, *Providence*, 181.

¹⁸⁷ Helm, *Providence*, 178.

¹⁸⁸ Farrer, *Faith*, cited in Helm, *Providence*, 180-1.

¹⁸⁹ Helm, *Providence*, 181.

formulating a precise explanation.¹⁹⁰ This may appear to be an evasion, but should rather be seen as a recognition of finitude and humility. While the exact mechanism evades full explanation, Reid decisively shows, in the broader context of predestination, how the different orders of causation concur:

Calvin's Predestination has really nothing to do with antecedent factors – not even with factors earlier than those involved in determination. It has to do with factors, or more strictly with a factor, if the term be admissible at all, which is prior to antecedence of any kind, and it is therefore located not at an earliest point in time but rather pretemporally or supratemporally. Philosophically, when we deal with the relation of a finite magnitude to a greater but also finite magnitude, the independence of the one is conserved only at the expense of the other; when we deal with a really infinite magnitude and its relation to a finite magnitude, this is no longer the case. Theologically, God is not simply the magnification of man, and His qualities are not simply the qualities of man increased to the power of *n*. If this were true of Him, then predetermination would be merely determination on a greater, grander scale, and there would be even less hope of securing the independence of the finite magnitude which man is. But just because He is really infinite, the Predestination of which He is the author does not rob man of his independence and therefore of his responsibility.¹⁹¹

The fact that the difference between divine causation and human causation is not one of greater to lesser but one of infinite to finite means that we should expect to be unable to define exhaustively divine causation in the way we can human.

Beyond the distinction between primary and secondary cause, however, there is a further distinction concerning causation to be drawn. Both Turretin and Heppé argue that a difference must be observed between a relationship of cause and effect, and a relationship of antecedent and consequent.¹⁹² This assertion is related primarily to the *locus* of reprobation, but again there are obvious parallels with the ordination of Adam's Fall.

Turretin is bound to counter the accusation that God is the author of sin in the sense that the decree of reprobation causes sin.¹⁹³ Turretin

¹⁹⁰ Helm, *Providence*, 181.

¹⁹¹ Reid, 'Introduction', 26.

¹⁹² Turretin, *Inst.*, IV.xiv.6 (1:381), IV.xiv.27 (1:387f.). Heppé, *RD*, 135-6, 186-7.

¹⁹³ Turretin, *Inst.*, IV.xiv.6-7 (1:381).

answers that 'sins are the consequents, rather than the effects of reprobation; necessarily bringing about the futuration of the event, but yet not infusing or producing the wickedness; not by removing what is present, but by not supplying what would sustain.'¹⁹⁴ We have seen this already in relation to divine withholding. What this adds is the observation that an event or decree which infallibly ensures that another event will occur is not necessarily to be viewed as the cause. More explicitly, Turretin asserts forcefully, with the support of the anathemas of the Council of Orange, that 'between the antecedent and the consequence causality does not intervene.'¹⁹⁵ He illustrates this with the relation of the decree to the final destruction of the reprobate. The destruction of a man follows necessarily from the decree of reprobation. However, the cause of that destruction is the guilt of original and actual sin.¹⁹⁶ Thus, a decree which certainly ensures a future event cannot properly be called the cause of that event.

Heppe's initial discussion of this distinction arises in the context of the simplicity of God. In a concern to defend simplicity he must affirm that causes of the divine will are not to be sought, such that his counsel, will and wisdom be separated. Thus he cautions 'we must not therefore conclude "that every consequence is so related to what precedes, that obviously the latter are caused by the former, and that the former are therefore more desirable than the latter."' ¹⁹⁷ Like Turretin, this is applied to reprobation: 'Nor is God to be called the author of sin: not reprobation, but the actual will of man, must be called the cause of sin.'¹⁹⁸

The decree of reprobation is not unlike the ordination of the Fall. Indeed, the decree to 'permit' Adam to fall is the necessary antecedent to the decree to have a reprobate people—the two are inextricably linked. Equally, the two decrees are like in that they necessitate the future occurrence of sin. By deduction and analogy then, it is appropriate to apply Turretin's and Heppé's distinction to the ordination of the Fall and assert that God's will for Adam to fall was

¹⁹⁴ Turretin, *Inst.*, IV.xiv.6 (1:381).

¹⁹⁵ Turretin, *Inst.*, IV.xiv.27 (1:388).

¹⁹⁶ Turretin, *Inst.*, IV.xiv.33 (1:389).

¹⁹⁷ Heppé, *RD*, 136.

¹⁹⁸ Heppé, *RD*, 187.

not the cause proper of his first sin, rather it was the necessary antecedent to the inevitable consequence.

These seven broad elements then constitute the Reformed conception of the divine *permissio*. In Reformed thought, this permission provides the necessary metaphysical distance between the decrees and action of God and the commission of sin by Adam to uphold God's righteousness in ordaining that Fall. In the next issue we will proceed to evaluate whether or not permission achieves this goal.

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