

The Sovereignty of God Over Evil

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The Biblical teaching on the sovereignty of God is summed up well by the Westminster Confession of faith: "God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so, as thereby *neither is God the author of sin*, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established."¹ The issue I wish to wrestle with in this article is the fact that God has, from all eternity, ordained all things that will happen (which would include evil), and yet is not the author of sin. How is this consistent? I believe that by examining what is meant by the terms "ordain" and "author of sin," we can come a long way in furthering our understanding.

As you read, keep in mind that I do not claim to be saying all that can be said, to know all about the way that God works, or to remove all difficulty and mystery in God's sovereignty. But I do wish to at least help people come to a greater understanding, in their own minds, of the sovereignty of God over moral evil.

What is meant by "ordain"?

As we will see in the Scriptures below, God has not given control of history over to human beings or anyone else. He is in control, and this means that He has from all eternity ordained everything that will happen. But what does it mean to say that God has *ordained* everything that will happen?

First, it means that *from all eternity, God decided what would happen in His creation*. Without consulting anybody else and without being limited by anything outside of himself, God has decided what will happen--from the big things down to the smallest details. This plan that God has made is, taken as a whole, exactly the way that He wants it. The second thing that is meant by the phrase "ordain" is that *God acts to bring about His plan*. He does not just sit back and watch his plan be fulfilled by chance. God takes action to bring about what He has planned. In sum, the truth that God has ordained whatever comes to pass means that He (1) decides what will happen and then (2) makes it happen.

¹ Westminster Confession of Faith, 3.1. Reproduced in full in Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Intervarsity Press and Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), pp. 1179-1196).

The testimony of Scripture

We see this in many Scriptures. Ephesians 1:11 says "we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who *works all things after the counsel of His will...*" First, notice that God works, or in other words "brings about," all things. Everything is brought about by God. Second, notice that God does this according to His own plan, "the *counsel* of His will." This plan was not governed by anything external to his own will. It is "the counsel of *His will*." Thus, "God both chooses what will happen and also works it out according to his plan."²

In Romans 11:36 we read "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen." Thus, all things have their source in God's eternal decrees, all things are brought to pass by God's almighty power, and all things have as their ultimate goal God's glory. In Proverbs 21:1 we read "The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He wishes." Daniel 4:35 says "And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, 'What hast Thou done?'"³

² John Feinberg, "God, Freedom, and Evil in Calvinist Thinking," in *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will*, volume 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), p. 465.

³ I wish to make a quick comment here about the position which affirms that God is control, yet also affirms that He does not determine everything that happens. This view tries to say that God is in control, yet many things happen that He does not ultimately want, all things considered (I say all things considered because I am speaking of God's sovereign will, not His moral will. This is an important distinction, which I deal with under the heading "God does not ordain sin for its own sake," above). This position is not only contrary to the Scriptures we have just seen, it is also inconsistent with itself. To say that *A* is in control of *B* is to say that *A* decides what *B* will do and causes it to do those things. To the extent *B* does things that *A* does not want it to do, *A*'s control is frustrated. Thus, if *B* does things that *A* does not want it to do, to that extent it is not in control. Applying this to the sovereignty of God, we see this: *to the extent that creation does what God does not, all things considered, want it to do, to that extent His control is frustrated*. Thus, if God does not determine everything that happens, we cannot speak of Him as being in control because His control would very often be frustrated. We can only affirm that He is completely in control if we affirm that He ordains everything that will happen.

The Scriptures we have seen above very clearly show that God determines all things. An especially relevant text which shows that God has in no way limited

Since God controls all things, this means that evil is also under the control of God. We see this explicitly in many verses. Psalm 105:25, speaking of the Egyptians in the time period of the Exodus, says that God "turned their heart to hate His people, to deal craftily with His servants." In Isaiah 10:5-15 we read of how God used the wicked nation of Assyria to carry out his judgments upon Israel. In Deuteronomy 2:30 we read "But Sihon king of Heshbon was not willing for us to pass through his land; for the Lord your God hardened his spirit and made his heart obstinate, in order to deliver him into your hand, as he is today." The crucifixion of Christ, which was the most sinful human act in all of history, was said to have been according to "the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God" even though it was "by the hands of godless men" that Christ was put to death (Acts 2:23; see also 4:28).⁴

The sovereignty of God over all things, including evil, is important for many reasons. This truth gives us peace of mind and security in a hostile world, for we know that our good God is sovereign over it all and is working for good. When bad things come to us through the sins of others, we can take comfort that God is working it all for our good. This truth also gives us wonder and awe as we marvel at how God can even use His enemies to accomplish His plans.

Understandably, however, for many people it is hard to be comfortable with this truth because of a pressing question: If God brings about all things, good and evil, why is he not the author of sin? As we saw in the Westminster confession of faith, and as we know from the Bible, a proper view of God's sovereignty believes both that God brings about all things, yet He is not the author of sin. How can this be?

What is meant by "author of sin"?

We will come a long way to solving this difficulty if we understand what is meant by saying that God is not the "author of sin." It means at least five things:

His control is Psalm 135:6, which says "Whatever the Lord pleases, He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps." If God wants to do something, *He does it.* "Whatever the Lord pleases, *He does.*" Thus, for anything that happens, if God had not wanted it to occur, all things considered, He would have prevented it. We see this also in Isaiah 46:10, where God says that "I will accomplish *all* My good pleasure." There is therefore nothing that God wants to happen, all things considered, that will be left undone.

⁴ This is only a small sampling of the Scriptures that teach God's control over evil. For a collection of many others, see the list I have made, *The Sovereignty of God*, or my article *The Amazing Providence of God*.

1. God never commits sin.
2. God is not the positive cause of sin.
3. God cannot be blamed for sin.
4. God does not approve of sin. He hates it and justly punishes it.
5. God does not ordain sin for its own sake.

God never sins

The first thing we mean when we say "God is not the author of sin" is that God never commits sin. "I will proclaim the name of the Lord. Oh, praise the greatness of our God! He is the Rock, *his works are perfect*, and *all his ways are just*. A faithful God who *does no wrong*, upright and just is he" (Deuteronomy 32:3-4, NIV). "There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be!" (Romans 9:14).

Thus, an important distinction that we must make is that *ordaining sin is not the same as doing sin*. It would be entirely false, when speaking of God, to equate ordaining sin with committing sin. God ordains sin without committing sin Himself. Gordon Clark gives some helpful illustrations at this point: "...it should be evident that God no more commits sin than he is writing these words. Although the betrayal of Christ was foreordained from eternity as a means of effecting the atonement, it was Judas, not God, who betrayed Christ. The secondary causes in history are not eliminated by divine causality, but rather they are made certain."⁵

God is not the positive cause of sin

God is behind good and evil in different ways. From the verses we saw above, it is clear that God is the cause of all things. However, we must understand that God is behind evil in a different way than He is behind good. He is behind good in a way that renders Him fully deserving of all of the credit for it, but He is behind evil in such a way that He deserves none of the blame for it. D.A. Carson explains it like this: "To put it bluntly, God stands behind evil in such a way that not even evil takes place outside the bounds of his sovereignty, yet the evil is not morally chargeable to him: it is always chargeable to the secondary agents, to secondary causes [i.e., those who actually do it]. On the other hand, God stands behind good in such a way that it not only takes place within the bounds of his sovereignty, but it is always chargeable to him, and only derivatively to secondary agents...If this sound just a bit too convenient for God, my initial response (though there is more to be said) is that according to the Bible

⁵ Gordon Clark, *God and Evil: The Problem Solved*, (Hobbs, NM: The Trinity Foundation, 1996), p. 53.

this is the only God there is."⁶

Different kinds of causes. If we understand the differences between the ultimate cause, positive cause, and negative cause, it will help us to see why God deserves all of the credit for good, but none of the blame for evil. The *ultimate cause* is what brings about the event. Without this cause, the event won't happen. With this cause, the event will happen. Thus, the ultimate cause determines the outcome. But the ultimate cause can bring about the effect in different ways. It can act by means of a positive influence, which means directly influencing the object to make it act. In this case it functions as the *positive cause*, and would deserve credit for the action brought about. On the other hand, the ultimate cause can act by means of a negative influence, which means withholding certain influences to the extent that the desired result is brought about. In this case the ultimate cause functions as the *negative cause*.

With this in mind, there are two extremes to avoid. The first would be to deny that God is the ultimate cause of all things. This view would say that sin occurs apart from the plan of God, that God is not the sovereign controller of sin. This error would have to ignore many of the verses we saw above. The other extreme would be to affirm that God is the positive cause of sin. This error would be saying that sin proceeds from God and that he injects fresh evil into people's hearts to make them sin. This error would seem to say that God is the morally guilty cause of sin and would have to ignore verses such as James 1:13 "Let no one say when he is tempted, I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone."

The correct view seems to be that *God is the ultimate cause of sin, but He is not the positive cause of sin. Therefore, He cannot be blamed for sin.* In other words, God causes sin by *withholding* goodness, rather than by *injecting* evil. God does not produce the sin in people's hearts. Rather, it proceeds from their own hearts. God simply withholds the grace that would change the hearts, and thus is the ultimate cause but not the positive, or morally guilty, cause.

Let me give an example from Jonathan Edwards. The day occurs because the sun produces its light and bathes the earth in it. The light is directly produced and given by the sun. Thus, the sun is the positive cause of the day. Now imagine that for reasons of its own, the sun suddenly transferred to another solar system. Darkness would result on the earth. The sun would not be the positive cause of the darkness, but the negative cause, because the darkness is not something that was produced by the sun and imposed upon the earth, but was rather the result of the earth being left to its own nature. Thus, the sun could not be considered the morally guilty cause of the darkness. The sun would be, however,

⁶ D.A. Carson, *Reflections About Suffering and Evil: How Long, O Lord?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1990), p. 213.

the ultimate cause of this darkness, because its actions determined whether the earth would be light or dark. The sun could have chosen to stay, and daylight would have remained. By choosing to leave, darkness resulted.

Likewise, God is the ultimate cause of evil, but not the morally guilty cause. Evil results by His withholding the grace that would have prevented it, not by His producing sin. Thus, God gets the credit for the good because He is the positive cause of it--He directly produces the goodness in a Christian's heart that causes him to do good actions. But he gets none of the blame for sin because He does not produce sin in people's hearts, but directs it by means of negative causation.⁷

To further clarify this point, let us continue a little further. We must remember that we are all born sinful. Because of Adam's sin, we all come into the world with sinful hearts. Thus, God doesn't cause sin by taking righteous people and making them do what they don't want to. He does not inject sinful desires into people. Rather, we are already sinful. God simply leaves us to our own natures and *makes use of* the evil that is already there. Thus, we are responsible for our sinful actions because they proceed from our own heart. *The source of sin is in the human heart, not God.* What God does is divide, arrange, and direct the sin in the human heart, so that it manifests itself according to His purposes. God is sovereign over it because He arranges and shapes the form in which sin will express itself in. But we are accountable for it because it flows from our own hearts, not God. This helps us to understand the Scriptures which speak of God hardening someone's heart: God causes the heart to be hard not by injecting fresh evil into it, but by withdrawing His restraining grace so that the heart does what comes natural to it--become more rebellious.⁸

⁷ Here is a relevant quote by Edwards: "It would be strange arguing, indeed, because men never commit sin, but only when God leaves them *to themselves*, and necessarily sin when he does so, that therefore their sin is not from themselves, but from God; and so, that God must be a sinful being: as strange as it would be to argue, because it is always dark when the sun is gone, and never dark when the sun is present, that therefore all darkness is from the sun, and that his disk and beams must needs be black" (from *On the Freedom of the Will*, part IV section IX).

⁸ The gist of this section is that the potentiality and source of sin lies in the human heart, but the determination of how this source manifests itself in actuality is by God. A closer look at the means in which God shapes the way the human heart exercises itself will be covered in part II of this article. That article will also cover God's sovereignty over our good choices more in-depth. At this point one may wonder about why Christians sin, for they have had their hearts changed to become good. However, while our hearts have been made new, they are not yet perfectly new. We still have remnants of sin left in us. God continually is working in our lives to cause us to overcome the sin that is left in us and make us more holy. But we will not have perfectly holy hearts until we die and God removes the final remnants of original sin.

As should be clear from this paragraph, when I speak of negative causation I am not saying that God simply leaves a person to their own sinful nature, and that is all there is to it. God also directs the degree of evil in a person's heart by hardening it by means of negative causation or, if He wants to restrain evil, He softens the heart by means of positive causation. It seems that He also directs circumstances in order to insure that the sinful nature will carry out the specific sins that He has planned. For example, we read in 1 Kings 22:19-23 of God sending a deceiving spirit to "entice Ahab to go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead." God's action in letting Ahab be deceived was not simply a "hands off" (see also 2 Thessalonians 2:11-12). But the truth of negative causation shows us that God is never the fountain, or producer, of sin. God was not the positive cause of Ahab's sin. However, negative causation, as I pointed out in the previous paragraph, does not deny that God *makes use of* the sin that is already there or that He orchestrates the circumstances in order to direct the expression of the sinful nature.

In other words, negative causation shows that sinfulness is not in a person's heart because God produced it, but because He withheld the grace that would have eliminated the sin. But God does direct the degree of sinfulness in the heart and arrange the form in which the sin of the heart manifests itself by means of negative causation (withdrawing His restraining grace even more and thus hardening the heart), and/or by orchestrating circumstances so that the sin that He has ordained will be carried out.

Finally, the instance in first Kings also shows us the truth of "secondary causation." Simply put, God Himself is not the one who enticed Ahab to sin. Rather, God brought this about through a secondary cause--namely, the lying spirit that was sent. The fact of secondary causes makes it easier to see how God can use circumstances to bring about a sin that He has ordained, and yet not be the positive cause of that sin.

To bring this all together in greater clarity, let me offer this summary: The sin in the human heart is not produced by God. Rather, He is the negative cause of it because He is permitting it to exist when He could change it. Further, it seems that God uses negative causation and secondary causation to specifically direct the course of human sin. But God does this in such a way that He is never the positive cause of sin--that is, he is never the producer of evil in a person's heart. If a person sins or if their heart becomes more evil, it is by means of negative causation and secondary causes. Keep in mind, however, that I am not claiming to be giving--or to know--the full explanation of the way God's sovereignty over evil works.

Someone may object that, since God ultimately allowed us to fall into sin in the first place, sin is not our fault. But this objection does not work. God originally created humans morally good and blameless in Adam. Adam then sinned of His own accord. Yes, it was God's plan and He could have prevented it. Yet God

cannot be blamed because He did not force Adam to sin, but withheld the grace that would have prevented it. To be sure, it was not a case of God not doing enough to make it possible for Adam to obey or that God necessarily took away grace from Adam. Rather, it seems God probably withheld the further grace that would have necessarily kept Adam from sinning. Thus, we often say that God permitted Adam to sin.

What is meant when we speak of God permitting something? This distinction between positive and negative causes shows why we sometimes speak of God as "permitting" something. When we speak of divine permission, we are not saying that God gave control of the situation over to the human will to let it do whatever it would. Rather, we are referring to the means that God used to bring about the action he had ordained. We aren't denying that God caused it, but are trying to get across the fact that God is behind good in a different way than He is behind evil. Thus, we speak of God "permitting" something. We mean that He could have prevented it, but deliberately withheld the grace that would have prevented it.

While that last statement has proved very helpful in clarifying my understanding, it is incomplete by itself. As we saw earlier, God's permission doesn't mean that he ceases being involved in the situation. God is still controlling the situation. Permission refers to the means God uses to control the situation. Thus, we must understand that God's permission is a *directive permission*. This means that God, by means of negative causation, is able to so arrange the situation that the option that He has ordained will necessarily occur.

We saw a glimpse at how God does this in our discussion of negative causation and secondary causes. In the book *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* by Lorainne Boettner, there is an insight that will perhaps shed more light on how God uses negative causation to direct the course of sin: "Our sinful natures will always go to the boundary set by the permission of God. Hence, God's bounding of sin renders certain what and how much will come to pass. Satan could go no farther with Job than God permitted; but it is certain that he would go as far as God allowed." God's permission is like a fence that He puts around sin. He can move the fence to give sin a large area, or a small area, and sin will always go to the boundary permitted by God. Thus, God can determine what sin will do by setting its boundaries at the spots that will bring about what He has ordained.⁹

⁹ While not directly related to our task of trying to show the consistency between God's sovereignty and human responsibility, it is important to understand the difference between general permission and specific permission in order to have a more accurate view of God's sovereignty. *Specific permission* means that God could have prevented the particular thing that happened, but He willingly chose to let it happen in order to fulfill a greater purpose. Thus, each and every thing that God permits is permitted because it is part of His plan--because He wants that specific event to happen. Specific permission, in other words, means that if

God cannot be blamed for sin.

Because of these things, it should be clear that God cannot be blamed for our sins. They are our own fault because we are the ones who do them, God is not forcing us to do them but simply making use of the evil that we are by nature, and because God is behind good and evil in different ways. He is the ultimate cause of sin, but not the morally guilty cause of it.

Another thing is that if God, as Sovereign King of the universe, has the power to control all things, surely we must also ascribe to Him the wisdom to control things in such a way that the guilt falls upon the creatures for their sins and as Moral Governor of the universe He can justly hold them accountable for their sins. In other words, God's creative, sovereign power is not simply something that brings about your choices, but is also able to establish it as your choice in such a way that responsibility lies with you and not Him.

These things, together with one more thing that we are going to examine in Part II of this article, are very helpful to my mind in showing how it is consistent that God controls sin, yet is never guilty of sin. But even if they don't fully appeal to your mind, it would still be wrong to blame God for sin. This is because Scripture rejects such a terrible conclusion. According to Scripture, it is our own fault when we sin and we are justly held responsible for them. We must accept what Scripture teaches even if we cannot fully understand how it fits together. The long and the short of it is this: we are accountable for our actions because God says we are. Since God always speaks the truth, this then it is just for Him to hold us accountable for all that we do.

God does not approve of sin. He hates it and justly punishes it.

God permits something, it is because He wants it to occur, all things considered. God only permits what He has purposed, and everything that God permits in this sense happens.

General permission, on the other hand, would mean that disobedient actions are not specifically permitted because God planned them to occur; instead, He permits disobedience in the sense that He gave us the free choice and made it possible for us to disobey. But, on this view, no specific disobedient actions were part of God's plan. Rather, they are simply the unfortunate consequence of free will, and not a part of a plan that God is enacting to bring the greatest glory to Himself. Obviously, the Scriptures teach specific permission. When God permits something, it is a specific--directive--permission.

The fourth thing it means for God to not be the author of sin is that God does not approve of sin. In other words, we should not conclude from God's sovereignty that He is pleased with sin or that it is not wrong. Habakkuk 1:13 says "Thine eyes are too pure to approve evil, and Thou canst not look on wickedness with favor." Luke 22:22 says "For indeed, the Son of Man is going as it has been determined; but woe to that man by whom He is betrayed!" But why does God ordain sin if He does not approve of it? This brings us to our last point.

God does not ordain sin for its own sake

When God ordains a sinful action, it is not for the sake of the sin itself. Rather, it is for the sake of bringing about a greater good. This is important for a proper understanding of God's sovereignty: when God ordains evil it is always for the sake of bringing about a greater good.

When humans sin, we do it because we delight in the sin. Our intentions are for evil. But God does not ordain sin because He delights in it. Rather, His intentions are for good. He ordains evil because He delights in the good that He plans to bring out of it. We see this, for example, in the life of Joseph. His brothers, out of hatred, had beat him up and sold him into slavery. But many years later, when Joseph saw his brothers again, he said "And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive" (Genesis 50:20).

Let me give an example. If somebody were to, out of the blue, take a knife and cut open your stomach, they would be doing wrong. But if you are in the hospital and a doctor takes a knife and cuts you open, he has done nothing wrong. In both cases, the person is doing the same thing--cutting open your stomach. And in both cases, they are doing something that causes pain. But the first person is sinning and the doctor is not. The reason for this lies in their intentions. The first person is committing sin because He doesn't have good reason for what he is doing--he has evil intentions. But the doctor is doing good because his intentions are to save your life by removing a cancerous tumor from your stomach. It is the same way with God's control of evil. Since His purposes are for good, He is not doing anything wrong.

To expand upon the illustration, imagine that the knife the surgeon uses is "alive." The knife knows what it is doing, and has evil intentions. It takes pleasure in cutting upon your stomach, not because it wants you to be made well, but simply because it delights in causing pain. The knife's involvement in this situation would be evil. But that would not make the surgeon's involvement evil, because his intentions are still good. We would not blame the surgeon for the evil intentions of its knife. In the same way, God often uses evil people to accomplish His good purposes. But God cannot be blamed for their sin anymore than the surgeon could be blamed for the sinfulness of its knife.

This brings us to the distinction between God's *moral will* and His *sovereign will*. God's moral will is what He wants in and of itself. It is what is agreeable to His nature, and thus pleases Him. It is recorded in the Bible, such as the Ten Commandments, and we are required to obey it. Do not kill, do not lie, do not steal, etc., are all expressions of God's moral will.

God's sovereign will, on the other hand, is what He brings to pass in history. It is what He wants to occur, *all things considered*. God's moral will only involves good things, whereas God's sovereign will includes evil as part of His plan. While God often allows His moral will to be resisted, His sovereign will cannot be resisted. It is always accomplished.

Perhaps the best example is the crucifixion of Christ. God's moral will says "Do not kill." Yet, the crucifixion could not occur without sinful people violating this command and murdering the innocent Son of God. As we saw earlier, the crucifixion had been ordained by God from all eternity. Thus, God's moral will was "do not kill," but his sovereign will was that they would crucify Christ.

John Piper gives a helpful illustration here. God has the capacity to look at any event through two lenses, a wide angle lens and a narrow angle lens. When God looks at an evil act through the narrow lens, He sees it for what it is in itself and abhors it. This is His moral will. But when God steps back and looks at that event in the wide angle lens, He sees it in relation to all the events flowing up to it and flowing out from it. He sees it in relation to the good that He plans to bring out of it and its overall place in His wise plan. This is His sovereign will. It is in this sense that He wants it to occur and thus ordains it.

Thus, while evil is bad, it is a good thing that God ordains it to occur. As Jonathan Edwards wrote, "Evil is an evil thing, and yet it may be a good thing that evil should be in the world...as for instance, it might be an evil thing to crucify Christ, but yet it was a good thing that the crucifying of Christ came to pass. As men's act, it was evil, but as God ordered it, it was good."¹⁰

Conclusion

Having seen what is meant by the phrases "ordain" and "author of sin," we should now have a more accurate understanding of God's sovereignty. Further, our examination of this truth has also shown that it is logically consistent to affirm that God sovereignly controls all things, yet is not the author of sin. I do not claim to have said everything that could be said, nor do I deny that many things that

¹⁰ Jonathan Edwards, "Concerning the Divine Decrees in General and Election in Particular," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, volume II, (Banner of Truth, 1995 reprint), pp. 525-543.

would help us understand the issue more are not in our grasp while we are on earth. But I propose these insights for the sake of promoting greater understanding, consistency, and thought on this issue. Finally, we must remember that the goal of this article is not to cause an unbalanced focus on this issue, but to clear away obstacles and possible misunderstandings so that people who have problems accepting the sovereignty of God over evil will come to accept it, and that people who do believe it can have a more accurate understanding. The end of this all is that God be glorified as we apply the great truths of His sovereignty.¹¹

Now that we have seen that God controls all things without being the author of sin, in the next article we will see that God's sovereignty does not offer violence to the will of his creatures.

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¹¹ See my article *The Importance of Providence*.