

HERMENEUTICS AND NATURAL DEPRAVITY

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Exegetical Impasse

A standoff has persisted in exegesis between Calvinistic and non-Calvinistic interpreters largely because no resolution can come at the level of individual passages that have implications for anthropology. A few examples illustrate the problem.

(a) Psalm **51:10** says, “Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.” Ezekiel **18:31** shows another emphasis, “Make for yourselves a new heart and a new spirit.” The difficulty is whether Psalm **51:10** interprets Ezekiel **18:31** or *vice versa*.

(b) “I have hardened his heart,” God says of Pharaoh (Exodus **10:1**).¹ Elsewhere the text says, “. . . he [Pharaoh] hardened his heart” (Exodus **8:15**)² and “his heart was hardened” (7:22, 14; 9:7).

(c) Ephesians **2:1** declares, “And he made you alive when you were dead through your trespasses and sins.” Later, the text commands in **5:14**, “Awake, you that sleep, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”

(d) “And . . . Lydia . . . heard us—whose heart the Lord opened to give heed to the things that were spoken by Paul” (Acts **16:14**).³ “I am sending you to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light, from the dominion of Satan to God” (Acts **26:17b-18**).

(e) “My Father is giving you the true Bread out of heaven” (John **6:32**). “I have come down from heaven . . . [to do] the will of him that sent me” (6:38).

(f) “And now send men to Joppa and fetch one Simon” (Acts **10:5**). “Go with them, nothing doubting, because I have sent them” (10:20). “Cornelius . . . was warned . . . to send for you into his house” (10:22).

(g) “Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away” (13:3). “So, being sent forth by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia” (13:4).

(h) “But thanks be to God, who puts the same earnest care for you in the heart of Titus, for he accepted indeed our exhortation; but, being himself very earnest, he went forth to you of his own accord” (2 Corinthians **8:16-18**).

In these passages God opens the heart, the human messenger opens the heart, God opens the heart through the messenger, and the hearer opens his own heart. Is it that the messengers speak of God’s opening the heart because they do not want to take any credit that belongs to the power in a message they did not originate, or is it because God did something to the hearers’

heart while the messengers proclaimed the gospel? Is it that the hearers speak of God's opening their heart because they do not want to take any credit for something they knew they would never have done if God had not taken the initiative, or is it that he caused them to do something they knew could never have happened from the sheer power inherent in the message? Is the power of God exerted to enable the heart or to change the able heart? Unless some principle is found for getting behind these dilemmas, the process of interpretation is at a stalemate.

Proposed Solution

In preparation for the proposed solution to this impasse, some observations on Hebrew idiom may prove helpful. (1) Assigning a good activity to both God and man⁴ in the examples above parallels statements (2) assigning bad activity to both Satan and man in Acts 5:3-4. But Peter said,

"Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the price of the land? While it remained, did it not remain your own, and after it was sold, was it not in your power? How is it that you have conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men, but to God."

Something similar occurs between 1 Corinthians 7:5 and James 1:14, *"Do not deprive one another . . . in order that Satan not tempt you because of your incontinence."* *"Each person is tempted when he is drawn away by his own lust and enticed."*

(3) People's activity is assigned to Satan. Almost immediately after blessing Peter for his Good Confession, Jesus calls him "Satan" for objecting to the death of Christ: *"Get behind me, Satan"* (Matthew 16:23). Judas' decision to betray Christ is described as Satan's entering his heart (Luke 22:3; John 13:2, 27).

(4) The same activity is assigned to both God and Satan. The Old Testament text says both that Yahveh and Satan moved David to number the people (2 Samuel 24:1 + 1 Chronicles 21:1). Satan and Yahveh are both said to have brought all kinds of suffering and loss on Job (Job 1:6-2:3, 10 + 42:11). In the last days, the coming of the Lawless One is according to the working of Satan, which is the same thing as God's sending people a working of error (2 Thessalonians 2:9-10 + 11-12).

(5) Satan is said to do good. Paul called his thorn in the flesh "a messenger of Satan," even though it was given to help keep the Apostle humble (2 Corinthians 12:7).

(6) God is said to do evil. God is the one who makes people deaf, dumb, and blind (Exodus 4:11).⁵ God hardened the spirit of Sihon, king of Heshbon, so he would not let the wandering Israelites pass through his territory (Deuteronomy 2:30). Samson's interest in Delilah was from the Lord, who was seeking an occasion against the Philistines (Judges 14:4).

(7) Satan and God are said to undo each other's activity. God sows the seed Satan takes out (Matthew 13:19 = Mark 4:15 = Luke 8:12). God gives repentance to those whom Satan has taken captive (2 Timothy 2:24-26).

(8) A bad thing is simply assigned to Satan. People's blindness to the gospel is Satan's blinding them to it (2 Corinthians 4:4). Paul's not being able to visit the Thessalonians is Satan's hindering (1 Thessalonians 2:18). Cares and anxieties are Satan's continuous attempts to devour people.

(9) People's turning away is God's giving them up (Romans 1:21 + 24, 26, 28).

The upshot of all this is that in the case of human action God does the good in the same sense that Satan does the evil. Scripture often credits a person's action to (a) its ultimate inspiring source. A good example of this phenomenon is Philippians 2:13, "*For it is God that works in you both to will and to do.*" Paul evidently means that God is, and should be, the motivating source of their high resolves so that their obedience does not depend on Paul's presence.⁶ Scripture credits a person's action to (b) the one who permits and ratifies it. Surely human beings are not mere pawns in the hands of supernatural contestants. Using the Satan statements as a control on the God statements, we conclude that the Bible often employs linguistic and theological mechanisms in expressing a point other than the immediate impression an English reader may receive.

A principle is needed for transcending the deadlock between certain pairs of passages. The hermeneutical program is to select principles which do not produce interpretations that ultimately violate the self-consistency of God. To put it differently, interpretations are to be chosen that do not eventuate in the Great Dilemma. This method does not guarantee correct understanding, but it eliminates a class of incorrect ones. In the biblical study of mankind and salvation, it provides a method for working with texts arrayed against each other by interpreters of opposite viewpoints. From the theoretical standpoint, the above passages about Satan's activity seem to suggest directions the answer may take, and so a list of relevant linguistic phenomena appears below.

Relevant Linguistic Observations

Streamlining causal distinctions

Common speech does not always distinguish the precise ways in which causes and effects relate to one another. Since scripture was written for the people in the language of the people, we can expect this "streamlining of causal distinctions" to appear in scripture as well. Biblical writers were men with a strong God-consciousness, which further accentuates the tendency to use "God talk." Semitic language usage speaks more loosely than modern English

does;⁷ so English readers must take care not to impose upon biblical idiom an expectancy created by their own customs of language usage. Even the evil that exists is God's doing insofar as he is responsible for it.

Much of the Augustinian-Calvinistic understanding of mankind and salvation comes from reading causal statements in unnaturally rigid and "literal" ways. This practice fits with the tendency to consider in terms of the categories of nature and law those matters that are functional and relational, or at least to try to reduce them to these categories. The philosophical errors about the relationship of nature and action create a determinism that gets applied to the interpretation process.

Passages exhibiting such causal streamlining are taken to mean that people cannot respond unaided to the influence exerted on them by the message, by human circumstance, and by interpersonal relationships. For example, John 6:37 says, "*All that the Father gives me will come to me, and the one that comes to me I will certainly not cast out.*" Giving people to the Son does not eliminate their ability to come to the Son. The Father designed salvation to involve people's coming to the Son; and the Son, working with the Father, accepts them. In the same chapter Jesus says that the *Father* "*is giving you the true Bread out of heaven*" (6:32) even while he speaks of his own coming "*down from heaven to do God's will*" (6:38). Jesus was delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God (Acts 2:23) even though he laid down his life of himself (John 10:11-18).

Causal distinction includes the difference between permissive and prescriptive will. Prescriptive will refers to what God originates and specifies. Permissive will refers to what originates outside of God under his ratifying control. Divine glorification, purposefulness, and security come under both modes of divine will. People's actions allowed by God may be called God's actions in the permissive sense. Since God is omnipotent, he can intervene and stop whatever is contrary to his purposes. Everything that happens, then, happens only because he allows it or causes it directly or indirectly. E. M. B. Green comments that permission-prescription is not linguistically distinguished in Semitic dialects.⁸

Calvinism customarily reads the will of God as prescriptive will. In place of permission-prescription as used here, Calvinism has necessity and compulsion. Both necessity and compulsion are prescriptive, however. Necessity forces action from within, while compulsion forces it from outside. But the location of the origin for the determinism is not the point; determinism itself is the point. Permission allows choice between possibilities and initiation outside of God whereas it is difficult to see how these possibilities can exist under necessity and compulsion. The "raised up" passages provide a case in point.

Perhaps another way of conceptualizing this matter of causal series is direct and indirect operation. People are not able to come to the Son unless the Father draws them, but the drawing

is through the proclaimed word they learn. Right after saying that no one can come except God draws them, Jesus says, “*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. . . . It is written in the prophets, ‘And they will be taught by God.’ Everyone that has heard from the Father and has learned comes to me*” (6:44). The person “cannot” come, not because of inability but because of circumstance. He has not been taught by God, but by someone else. People that believe ideas incompatible with the Father’s are not going to be drawn to the Messiah he sent. Jesus’ comments apply to the Messianic misunderstanding in first-century Judaism. Since political, militaristic expectancies for Messiah erred from the Father’s intentions, religious leaders were not going to be drawn to Jesus because he showed no political aspirations. To be drawn by the Father, a person has to appreciate the values and purposes of the Father. Whether these leaders had the ability to change their expectations and respond to the Father’s Messiah, lies aside from the content of this context. John 6:37, 44 do not address the doctrine of natural depravity.

Hebrew idiom can speak of a man’s begetting his distant descendant. “Son of” can refer to a distant ancestor. This familiar set of expressions readily illustrates indirect action spoken of in the form of direct action. On the road to Damascus, Jesus told Paul that he was persecuting Christ (Acts 9:5; 22:9; 26:14). Whenever someone does good or bad to Christ’s followers, it can be said to be done to Christ himself (Matthew 25:40-45).

Romans 8:29 is commonly appealed to by non-Calvinists to argue against Calvinistic predestination. Calvin taught that God ahead of time determined the eternal destiny of all persons aside from any consideration of acts on their part. However, Paul says in this passage, “*Whom he foreknew he predestined.*” Calvinists typically pose a prior question, “*Foreknowledge of what?*” The response is “*foreknowledge of faith.*” Another prior question is then asked: “*How did the person get that faith?*” The Calvinist says that God gave that faith to him. But again, a question must be asked, “*How did God give him that faith?*” Paul answers that question later in the same epistle, “*Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ*” (Romans 10:17, cp. 14). Faith comes when a person responds to the word he has heard. This line of thought exemplifies the importance of distinguishing elements in a causal series.

From an omniscient viewpoint the distinction between purpose and result tends to disappear especially when combined with the prescriptive-permissive variable. Verbally blurring purpose-result appears in John 9:3. Jesus explains that the blind man’s condition was “*so the works of God would be made manifest in him.*”⁸ What had a permissive origin in the outworking of natural causes became an occasion for glorifying the Father through his Son’s miracle. God permitted natural processes to work themselves out unchecked. The result was that Christ could heal the blind man to God’s glory. The omniscient God knew ahead of time what natural processes would produce in this man’s life; yet he did not prevent that result. God also knew that

Jesus would heal him. This time, permitting the blindness had the purpose of letting Jesus heal him to the glory God. That is a different thing from saying that God made him blind so Jesus could heal him to the glory of God.

Related to the purpose-result distinction is a distinction between chronological and logical order in association with the doctrine of divine prescience and prior intention. “*As many as were ordained to eternal life believed*” (Acts 13:48). The ordination to eternal life chronologically preceded the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4; Revelation 17:8), as it did the kingdom prepared for the faithful (Matthew 25:34), and the laying of the basis for entering it (Revelation 13:8). Calvinism, however, makes these all logically before as well as chronologically previous. The importance of saying that these Gentiles were ordained to life is that letting them come to “the light” (Acts 13:47) accorded with God’s prior intention announced in Isaiah 49:6. Luke cites the passage to justify offering the gospel to Gentiles when the Jews refused it (Acts 13:44-46), lest offering the gospel to Gentiles be seen as a corroborative reason for the Jews’ decision to disbelieve. Not only had God determined that they could come, but in anticipation of their coming, had ordained them to eternal life. Consequently, Luke indicates the propriety of turning to the Gentiles in the historical proclamation of the gospel. Ordination was to eternal life, not to the ability to have faith; so the ordination correlated with faith rather than caused it.

Interchange of nature, state, and action terms

Romans 8:7-8 requires a distinction between natural and circumstantial inability: “*The mind of the flesh is enmity against God, because it is not subject to God’s law neither indeed can it be; they that are in the flesh cannot please God.*” “*The mind of the flesh*” is described in 8:6a as “*death.*” Death stands for that system of thinking which does not go beyond the realm of the physical, the natural, and the temporal. It is a thinking pattern that is “separated from God.” This system is antithetical to the “mind of the spirit” (8:5b), which gives precedence to spiritual, supernatural, and eternal concerns. People operating in the “mind of the flesh” cannot please God because their system is opposed to God and contrary to God’s spiritual, supernatural, and eternal purposes. They “cannot” be subject to God because they are in a system that “is not” subject to God.

The Apostle is speaking here of an inability to please God while operating in the system of the flesh. He says nothing about a person’s inability to change systems. No sinner can please God because even the good the sinner does comes from a circumstance of imperfection, which is enmity against God and which cannot be escaped because of the nature of imperfection. A similar point occurs in 1 Corinthians 10:21: “*You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of*

demons.” The manner of the inability is circumstantial, not natural. The inability lies in the circumstance, not the person.

Interpreters of scripture need to take care in dealing with the English word cannot.⁹ That it does not necessarily mean natural inability should be obvious from a usage like John 5:19, 30, in which Jesus says he cannot do anything of himself. It clearly means that as Son he cannot do whatever he pleases and yet be Son. Therefore, when the text says in the same context, “*How are you able to believe*” (5:44), it can have the same circumstantial force. Seeking the glory of other people opposed to God, people cannot believe unto receiving the glory of God. Believing people and believing God involves two incompatible programs. We must let go of the one to take hold of the other. Whether we can let go and take hold of the other differs from whether we can take hold of the second without letting go of the first.

1 John 3:9 clearly involves circumstantial inability, “*Whoever God begets does not sin because God’s seed abides in him, and he cannot sin because God has begotten him.*” For one thing, “does not sin” means does not sin characteristically. In addition, the passage means that we cannot be characteristically sinning and have God’s seed in us. Having God’s seed in us and not sinning characteristically are coextensive. If the one is missing, so is the other. The circumstance is such that having the seed eliminates having sin and *vice versa*. That poses a different question from whether we can lose the seed, so to speak.

To this circumstantial class also belongs Jesus’ comment in John 15:5, “*Without me you can do nothing.*” We must abide in Jesus before what we do will have any significance attached to it relative to kingdom matters. If Jesus abides in us, we will be producing the fruit of that abiding because we will be doing things we would not be doing without Christ’s influence. Interpersonal influence is not such that we have to move in the direction of that influence; neither does it apply in a case where we could not do the desired act.

In Romans 3:12 Paul quotes Psalm 53:3 as saying, “*There is no one that does good, no, not a one.*” Doing good appears in the beginning of the section where Paul sets forth perfect righteousness as the requirement for fellowship with a righteous God. The Apostle takes *good* to mean perfectly good as in Jesus’ reply to the rich young ruler, “*There is none good except God*” (Matthew 19:17; Mark 10:18; Luke 18:18). Paul does not claim that every act of even a sinner is tainted by egocentric motives. He means that no one has reached perfect goodness. Such people cannot do good, although they may do a good, as Jesus says again, “. . . *you, being evil, give good gifts to your children*” (Matthew 7:11; Luke 11:13).¹⁰ Being once in the state of imperfection, they cannot do perfect goodness even though they can do good things.

According to John 6:44 no one can come to the Son unless the Father draws him. What Jesus means is not that a supernatural influence must regenerate a degenerate capacity. Rather, he means that no one can come to him except on the Father’s terms. No one can come to the Son

except the Father is the one drawing him. Trying to come to the Son on some other terms means that someone besides the Father would be drawing him. People cannot establish the kingdom of God after their own designs, political or otherwise.

After the feeding of the five thousand (John 6:1-4), a note appears that Zealot forces, endeavoring to further their political purposes against Roman occupation, tried to make Jesus their Messianic king (6:15). The next day a four-stage confrontation takes place between Jesus and these rebuffed patriots. As an open challenge to their concept of the Messianic kingdom, Jesus concentrated attention on his identity with the Father's will. Anyone coming to the Son must be willing to adopt the Father's purpose for his Son. Being drawn by the Father of the theocratic king equals responding to his program rather than to someone else's—like their own. It also equals responding to the theocratic Son himself.

The political leaders were not in the circumstance of being drawn by the Father because they were being drawn by their own military idols and political ideals. Whether they could in themselves to be drawn by the Father's purposes differs from whether they were "able" to be drawn by the Father's purposes committed as they were to their own purposes. The two programs being incompatible, these leaders could not operate in the one while being committed to the other.

A cluster of images in the gospels center around the concept that only good trees bear good fruit (Matthew 7:15-20; 12:33-37; Luke 6:43-45; cp. James 3:1-12). Calvinistic interpreters take such statements to mean that there is a correlation between nature and action. A general correlation does exist, but it is not a one-to-one correlation between nature and action. That would be determinism. The metaphors indicate a correlation between inner action and outer action inasmuch as the figures of speech are used in condemning hypocrisy. The inner actions of how people think, feel, and intend, express themselves outwardly, because outward behavior arises from inner motives. One person can see another's invisible motives by attending carefully to his visible actions. Watching "fruit" may suggest long-term observation that can detect the inconsistent living of studied hypocrisy. People sometimes try to cover up (Matthew 7:15) their real intentions by good talk (Matthew 12:34) and attempt to sever the connection between inner and outer action. It does not usually take long to "see through" such people because daily life issues to a great extent from the unconscious self.

The word *create* signifies the making of something new. Psalm 51:10 says, "*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.*" Paul has a similar statement in Ephesians 2:10, ". . . *created in Christ Jesus for good works.*" The subject of these verses is purifying the heart, cleansing from sin, being changed, being put in a new category. Only God can pronounce us no longer guilty of a misdeed, because it is against God that we sin. Creating a new heart is not remaking something marred but changing its functioning and relationships.

Creation in Christ changes relationship and standing as a result of being pronounced holy. “Creating” does not renew a sinner’s faculty or ability. People sometimes say, “*He makes me mad.*” The expression does not mean passiveness, but responsiveness even though the idea is cast in words that sound like the enraged person is passive. This is a matter of personal influence that moves someone else to action, not a natural creativity.¹¹ What is in fact an action is stated in substantive terms.

God’s giving the Gentiles repentance unto life (Acts 11:18) requires a distinction between state and action. Calvinists misapply the law of opposition at this point. The context deals with the contrast between Gentiles and Jews, not with a contrast between repentance as done vs. repentance as given. The Lucan expression means that God offers eternal life to Gentiles as well as Jews on the condition of repentance. God has made his repentance-unto-life possibility available to them as well as to Jews.¹² The intent is not that God needs to give Gentiles the ability to repent, but the opportunity to repent unto salvation through hearing the gospel. Repentance is not a gift received as distinguished from something done, but an opportunity given that has salvation value.

Ephesians 2:8 in English translation may appear to indicate that faith is given in such a way as not to be from the person, “*By grace you are saved through faith and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God.*” The word that is grammatically neuter, not feminine, and cannot refer to the feminine word faith as its antecedent. Instead, that points to the impersonal idea in the verb: salvation. Salvation does not come from us; God gives it to us by viewing us as righteous.

General rule and absolute uniformity

Jesus “*came to his own things and his own people did not accept him*” (John 1:11). The next sentence reads, “. . . *but as many as did receive him . . .*” As a rule, the Jewish people refused their Messiah, but thousands did believe. What is stated in the form of an absolute has the meaning of a generality (cp. John 3:33-34; Ephesians 5:29 + 2 Timothy 1:15-18).

This last linguistic mechanism combines with others in the case of 1 Corinthians 2:14, “*Now the natural man does not receive the things of God’s Spirit, because they are foolishness to him; and he cannot know them because they are spiritually discerned.*” First, the reader must understand what Paul means by “natural man.” “Natural man” does not mean “unregenerate man,” because the preceding context is not discussing the fallen nature of people, but the circumstance of people without a revelation of the mystery (1 Corinthians 2:7). Natural man refers to one unaided by revelation from the supernatural through the Spirit. Paul makes a similar use of *nature* in Romans 2:14 when he speaks of people without revelation doing “by nature” the

things in God's law. The origin of what they do lies within their own educated conscience as it often leads them into behavior that God wants but they have not heard.

Paul has a similar thing in mind in 1 Corinthians 2 since he is speaking of the mystery not known in the world (2:7-9) and only recently revealed (2:10a). Human wisdom could not discover the means of salvation, because it had no access to the mind of God, who determined the foundation of salvation (2:8). People would never have thought that a dead man could be the basis of salvation unto life. Such a thing was foolishness to philosophers (2:8; 1:18, 23) and a stumbling block to Jews, who anticipated an eternal political Messiah (2:8; 1:22-23). Unless people have access to God's mind, they cannot know what God is planning (2:9-11) any more than one person can tell what another is thinking. People know only their own thoughts. Likewise, only God ("the Spirit of God") knows his own thoughts till he reveals them.

Because natural people are those without access to supernatural revelation, they cannot know what such revelation contains. The word know in the original is aorist and should probably be taken as an ingressive aorist, "come to know," since the preceding material deals with the divine origination of this knowledge.

The mind of God is examined by the Spirit of God and must be understood in reference to a spiritual system. The Spirit puts God's thoughts into human language. Things of spiritual origin expressed in human words can carry spiritual content (1 Corinthians 2:13). Paul does not say that we cannot learn these things when God teaches us. Rather, we cannot come to know them without God's teaching us through revelation. We cannot find them out any other way. Consequently, 1 Corinthians 2:14b does not speak of our nature, but of the nature of our ignorance. We must depend on revelation in order to come to a knowledge of God's will. That revelation is by the Spirit, whose message Paul identified with his preaching. By preaching comes salvation; by philosophy comes lostness, as the Apostle declares elsewhere in Romans 1.

In 1 Corinthians 2:14a, Paul says that people, accustomed to reason and wisdom as the ultimate court of appeals, do not welcome things not learned through wisdom.¹³ We understand him to mean that as a general rule such is the case, "*. . . not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble [are called]*" (1:26). To such people, ideas not derived through reason are not intellectually sophisticated. Paul's generalization need not be denied. Few intellectuals answer the gospel call because they seek not to listen, but to discover for themselves so they can take pride in the shrewdness of their discovery and tell other people about it (1 Corinthians 1:26-31). Discovering carries more prestige than being told. Finding out for oneself brings more glory than asking for instruction. Although such people may not welcome or eagerly accept by faith the testimony of others, they can do so and sometimes do.

Allegorizing the comparison

“Dead through trespasses and sins” in Ephesians 2:1 is often allegorized into meaning *“insensible to spiritual matters.”* A corpse does not sense its physical surroundings, but to compare lostness to death does not mean that every element associated with a corpse can be applied to a sinner. A comparison parallels only specific connections. For example, one does not ask of the figure *“Christ paid the ransom,”* *“To whom did he pay it?”* That is not the reason for using the ransom figure to refer to salvation. Christ’s work and paying a ransom are alike in that the recipient cannot bring about his own release. There is a “payee” in ransom transactions, but that aspect of ransom does not apply to salvation.

In the same way, death in Ephesians 2:1 means “separation from God.” To be “dead” to something means to be separated from it or to lack awareness of it. To be “alive” to something is to be “with it.” If Paul intends to compare death and lostness in respect to separation and lack of awareness, he says nothing about the ability to be aware. Conversely, to be dead to the world is to lack awareness of its allurements in a participational sense, even as being dead to God means to lack awareness of his promptings in any participational, responsive, or obedient sense of knowing him.

Conclusion

An exegetical impasse exists on passages that deal directly with anthropology. The Great Dilemma implies a hermeneutical program whose direction is suggested by the observation that Satan terminology for human activity parallels the God terminology that Calvinism takes strictly. Among linguistic mechanisms relevant to these cases are the tendencies (1) to streamline causal distinctions; (2) to interchange nature, state, and action terms; and (3) to state generalities in the form of absolutes, which sets up the danger of allegorizing the comparison. Whether interpreters choose even to acknowledge these linguistic characteristics of biblical expression will be determined by whether they fit with their conception of human nature, divine nature, and the process of salvation generally.

Our contention is that (a) the Great Dilemma shows the fallacy of the prior exegetical reasonings that lead to that Dilemma. Correct interpretation should therefore be shaped by whether other possible interpretations lead to that final inconsistency. Especially is this general program appropriate because (b) the control passages about Satan’s activities exhibit the same characteristics observed in passages about divine activity. The sovereignty of God could conceivably be invoked to justify some viewpoints on passages about divine activity, but sovereignty cannot be invoked in like cases regarding Satan’s activity. Finally, (c) recognizable linguistic phenomena observable elsewhere can be brought to bear on the biblical evidence from

the Calvinistic approach. These phenomena appear in texts neutral to the present issue and in texts where presumably everyone would agree they apply.

If appropriate linguistic phenomena do in fact deal satisfactorily with individual passages used to support the Augustinian-Calvinistic view of mankind, then at the very least no decisive biblical evidence exists for that view. Only possible, not necessary, interpretations exist, which would make depravity at most a matter of opinion. The concept of natural depravity, then, does not have a biblical base, but a philosophical one.

End Notes

*¹Cp. 4:21; 8:19; 9:35; 10:20; 11:20; 14:4, 8, 17; Joshua 11:20; Romans 9:18.

*²Cp. 8:32; 9:34; 1 Samuel 6:6; Proverbs 21:29.

*³Cp. 2 Corinthians 2:12.

*⁴The mariners threw Jonah overboard (Jonah 1:15), but God also is said to have thrown him overboard (2:3). The big fish delivered Jonah (1:71 + 2:10), but God delivered him (2:6).

*⁵See also 1 Samuel 16:14; 18:10; 2 Samuel 12:11-12; Psalm 105:25; 2 Corinthians 7:7; 2 Thessalonians 2:11-12; Revelation 17:17.

*⁶Cp. Augustine in *De civitate dei* 22:2.

*⁷A. M. Hunter in *Introducing the New Testament*, page 29, states the idea rather strongly, “. . . the Jews had no doctrine of ‘secondary causes.’”

*⁸New Testament blurring of purpose and result occurs especially in John’s writing. He uses the typical purpose construction (ἵνα + subjunctive) in a number of places for what are really object clauses or what appears to call for a result concept.

*⁹*Cannot* most often translates οὐ δύναμαι, but it also renders οὐκ ἔστιν (Hebrews 9:5), οὐκ ἔχω (Hebrews 6:13) and οὐκ ἴσχυσα (Luke 20:26).

*¹⁰Matthew 12:34 is probably an example of tendential present, “*How can you, being evil, [try to] speak good?*”

*¹¹Note Augustine’s misuse of Psalm 41:5 (“*heal my soul*”) in this way (*De natura et gratia* 21). John 3:6 uses “*born again*” as a natural process to speak of a change of spiritual relationship.

*¹²Luke 23:47; Acts 5:31; cp. 2 Corinthians 7:10.

*¹³We have used the word *welcome* to express the meaning of the word δέχομαι (“*receive*”) in keeping with Leon Morris’ comment, “*The verb [receive] has an air of welcoming about it, being the usual word for receiving a guest*” (*The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 60).